MIKE CARTMELL

WRITINGS

MIKE CARTMELL

WRITINGS

orphan train

# Contents

Introduction 7

Landscape With Shipwreck (2000) 13

Stet (2001) 44

I Come Here For The Rites Of Your Unworlding (2008) 55

Experience Torn To Shreds/Experiments From The Granary (1992) 69

Notes While Waiting: An Interview 85

Monograph Design Mike Evans
Editor Mike Hoolboom

# Introduction

Mike Cartmell is a Canadian film/video artist who has greeted even the limited exposures of the fringe with reluctance. He has finished, or almost finished, a score of works which remain privately shelved, his great four-part work of the 1980s, *Narratives of Egypt*, was never completed, two further shorts promised for the International Experimental Film Congress in 1989 appeared only as catalogue descriptions, and a trio of long, perhaps feature-length works made in video have been kept from prying eyes. But whenever we talked it was clear that he was busy grappling with seismic readings of Blanchot and Susan Howe and Melville, and that these readings were not aimed to grant him a sinecure in the world of ideas, but instead were being pressed into the service of a much more personal project. How to take the next step? How do I love my son, my partner, my new almost-family?

While words are his home, he is slow to commit to them, to relinquish them, to release them from the place of possibility. But when I began working on a book anthology about fringe artist and mutual friend Phil Hoffman, I turned first of all to Mike and asked if he would contribute — and despite sometimes harrowing personal circumstances, documented in part in his writing, and a daily word count which might as well have been chiseled into stone with a toothpick — he managed to deliver on time not only the shiniest glint in the pile, but what turned out to be the title piece of the book, *Landscape with Shipwreck* (2001). After a bruising encounter with an overzealous copy editor shape-shifted his precious words, he rode the bad feeling across a reading of Phil's new movie, finished at last while *LwS* went to press, and weighed in on that too. He called it *Stet*. Half a dozen years, on another book anthology is in the works, this one about iconic Canadian filmmaker Frank Cole, the Ottawa artist who had grieved his grandparents by crossing the Sahara and making a pair of feature-length movies there, before being ambushed by bandits in Mali. This book, *Life Without Death: The Cinema of Frank Cole*, will appear later this year (2009), and Mike's contribution is, as usual, at the very heart of the matter.

"Each word is kept by a secret, which means that when people begin to learn the language they are beginning to pray, to becomes part of a community." (Louise Erdich)

This volume also contains an earlier essay on the work of Vincent Grenier, written on the occasion of a retrospective at the Anthology Film Archives, and a sterling chat included in my interview collection, *Inside the Pleasure Dome: Fringe Film in Canada* (2001).

Altogether these four essays mark a "new" critical voice, the words spun out of other texts and rubbed up against the object, the movie, the close encounter, in order to produce a rare intimacy. And he is busy producing pictures along the way: the man without a face, blue distance, Marian at the after-screening party asking, "Who's going to take me home?" The son who returns home to shoot his uncle seven times. Again and again he searches out the wound and slowly runs his attentions across it, until it can speak again. Mike's work is haunted by death, delivered in voices (gumbo queens, post-Joycean poetics and cannibals all sound out) and offered in fragments. His inscription is an endless grieving which he insists is the calling of all art. To leave a trace. To grant at last what cannot be faced, a face. To wear the mask of words and speak through them.

His witness. His testimony. Come inside and see

Landscape with Shipwreck

You've left out a lot.

No doubt. But is it ever possible to avoid gaps, ruptures, deficiencies, omissions, even ignorances and stupidities, in a commentary of this sort? Isn't every reading (viewing) always and only partial, the "taking" of a reading, as if checking temperature or humidity or rainfall, which must be re-enacted a vast multiplicity of times before any reasonably valid conceptualization of the climate can be gauged? And isn't that conceptualization at best only "reasonably valid," since at bottom the climatic system is chaotic, borne by uncertain and ungauged disturbances, critically unpredictable, in the last instance outside representation or symbolization? You can never be sure when you'll wind up in peril.

You seem obsessed with the weather. What does this have to do with anything?

Well, you see where I'm living. But I don't think the metaphor's inapt. I've tried to say (as is true for all that we can, with integrity, call "art") that at the heart of this "body" of work lies coiled a disturbing, chaotic, unpredictable, unmasterable "something;" compelling while repulsive, terrifying yet enchanting, offering a serene forecast of shelter, warmth, comfort at the same time that it bodes implacably the perilous risk of absolute loss, fracture, desheltering.

Or, to shift ground a little and bring you back to your theme, we could call this precarious "something" (following your beloved Blanchot) "that marine infinitude which both buoys and engulfs."

I hear that, chèr! I'm beginning to think I might could have a twin brother.

Well, we've been spending an awful lot of time together; perhaps we've come to resemble one another. But let me ask you this: I understand your lack of enthusiasm for the seamless text, but this is a pretty herky-jerky collection of observations, quotations (the relevance of which is often questionable), theses (on occasion possibly half-baked, or once in a while even over-baked), reminiscences, rhetorical questions, and so on. It seems at times that you barely have a plan. How is the reader to make sense out of this?

I have no desire to instruct readers on how to read, any more than I'd be inclined to instruct film-goers on how to view (if it can be put that way). All I can say is that the bits that I've put in place to make up this piece arrived via some form of compulsion; in a way, I don't trust them any more than you do. I could go out on a limb and say that these fragments somehow coalesce around the influence of some "strange attractor," which could be the film that you and I have only heard about, but which the reader will have seen presumably. I guess I can hope that at least some combination of my various bits will operate as a productive node to which the reader can link his or her (in principle unique) experience of Phil's cinema, and carry on that experience in an otherwise unlikely direction. I will say that although I haven't tried to be cryptic, the subject at stake here has something to do with the crypt.

OK, another thing: I have to say that this piece sometimes seems as much about you as about Phil's films. I mean, you've been monkeying with the metaphorics of shipwreck for years now, and then there's the Blanchot, the psychoanalysis, this idea of singularity, the various references to Mobile and to the blues, . . .

I'm going to take those out, I think.

. . . all right then . . . but also Sam, Jazzbo and his (or your) toothpick, and even your current status as (may I say it?) a bit of drifting debris. And of course (what a surprise!) you work Melville into it. Isn't this a bit hobby-horsical?

In attending to the singularity of the work I recognize the singularity not of its maker, but of myself. This would be true, I would say, for any attentive respondent to any work. But this encounter with my own singularity is neither simple nor simply satisfying. It is precisely that which overwhelms the subject's capacity to grasp it. It defies intelligibility, symbolization; one can't put it into words. And even to talk here about "recognition" or "encounter" is imprecise: maybe I can say that the experience of the work offers, or maybe only figures, an approach. And it is this experience (let's say again, "risky crossing") that draws me into the dangerous unknown of that aspect of my subjectivity that everywhere cuts against the grain of everything I take myself to be: that lacerates my "identity," let's say. And so, while enthralled, I'm also engulfed; while exhilarated, I'm also dispossessed. And therefore it's normal that I or anyone would be inclined to cling to whatever familiar flotsam drifts to hand, and to use it! After all, what else is there? (By the way, I'd say that something like this—or even precisely this--goes on for the maker in the process, the experience of making the work as well.)

I'm not sure I buy that, but I'll think about it. The last thing I have to say you're probably not going to like. But really, this idea of putting our discussion at the beginning of the piece bothers me! Isn't it going to look like some sort of disclaimer, or worse, some obsessional dodge that seeks to qualify or clarify or otherwise perfect or render more palatable (and thus somehow subvert) what you've already written? Can't you just let it stand?

Maybe I just can't stand it. Anyway, aren't prefaces always produced after the fact, after the work is done, and don't they often bear little or no relation either to the style or the substance of what they purport to introduce? They frequently appear to have different projects or agendas from the work proper, don't they? Well, maybe I'm just joshing. But the serious answer would be that one has to start with something, somewhere. I know it could look like an inane stratagem; it's even possible that this part was in fact invented, and written first!

That's true. It does seem odd that we could be eating this succulent black mess (it really is good, by the way!) if you've already washed ashore in Buffalo! After all, where would you have gotten the shrimpheads?

Well, I don't care that readers may think it's completely fictional; surely they realize that even within the realm of documentary film such things can be employed to productive purpose, so why not here? Reality is by no means a sure access to truth. It may be utterly no access. Besides, you know good and well my spintrian history with the act of writing. I need every tool and trick that might ease the release of the thing. Maybe this will only shed more obscurity on what I've written, but that doesn't matter. I'm not trying to clarify or even interpret; certainly not to analyze. I'm here to respond, as attentively as I can, and if it has to be from the saddle of my hobby-horse (or from somewhere between the stirrup and the ground) then so be it. If I've done a good job, then perhaps my experience of Phil's cinema (at least insofar as it appears in desultory translation here) will resonate, in consonance or dissonance, with some readers, to what I hope would be some useful effect. Finally, I take my maxim from a wonderful former student who, of her poignant, moving and absolutely singular films, once said: "I do what I do." I hope I can live up to it.

Well, thanks for the gumbo. Maybe we should go out. I bet it's cooled off some.

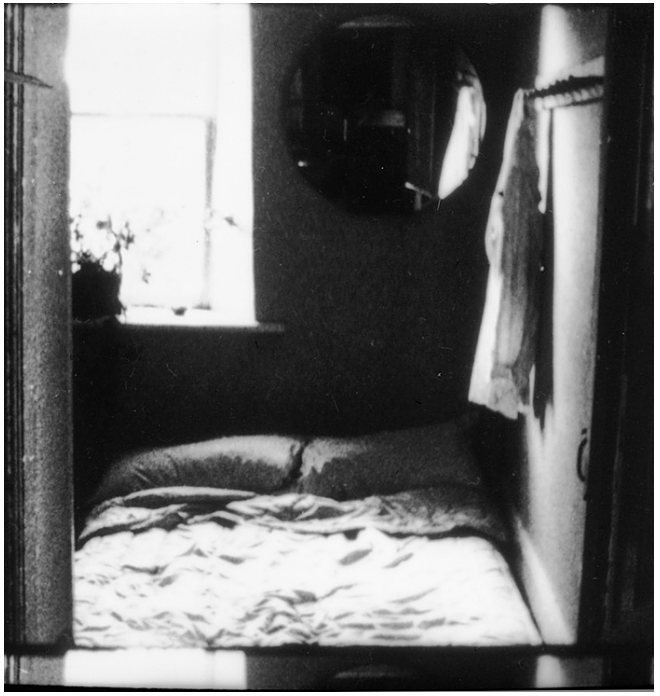
I'm not sure I'm ready. You know I like to be stationary. I think I'll just stay inside for now.

*Here at one view are our blighted prospects and the reward of our toil scattered to the winds.* (1)

It is a film as yet unseen, as yet, at this writing, unfinished, perhaps unnamed, which is the occasion for this and the other writing in this book, or at least for its collection here. An absent film; a lost object. A work of mourning that I somehow mourn in its absence, its yet-to-be.

I can testify.

I was present when Phil and Marian met. This is what I remember: it was about 18 years ago, in the late spring or early summer of 1983, after a screening of Alan Zweig's *Where's Howie?* at the Funnel. There was a gathering at AZ's place on Palmerston. I remember Marian telling stories of private-duty nursing in Los Angeles involving Alfred Hitchcock, Michael Jackson and Larry Flynt. I remember the rich intimacy of her voice; the fierce grope and exhilaration of her intellect. I can still see (am I imagining it?) the mad glint of wild hilarity in her enormous eyes. At the end of the evening Marian stood at the door to leave, and as if addressing the company in general asked: "So who's gonna take me home?" It was a question the undertones of which were in no way concealed. Phil was on his feet in no time. They went home together and remained together for twelve years. The message always arrives at its destination.



Marian after Marian Day, the feast of Mary, the birthday of god as a mother. Marian the stoneskipper, burrower, grubworm, worker in memory, digger into the past. That past, too, as maternal: we can go there for safety, comfort, knowledge; to find, as Wayne Salazar suggests in *Destroying Angel*, “peace before we die, contentment not confusion.” A refuge, a safe harbor. And Time itself as supramaternal; in Paul Celan’s formulation, *zitzenprächtig*: splendid with teats. Nourishment without remit, the source, the fountainhead—the stuff of cinema.

On a seashore in Newfoundland, at the close of *The Road Ended At The Beach* (the apotheosis of the “road film”), we hear a little girl singing a vaguely menacing improvised song about who her mother loves and doesn’t love and why.

But none of the temporal as maternal without an attendant threat: Marian wondered if bad memories could cause illness. Wayne asks, “when we reclaim the past, what do we unleash?” Is the devouring, superegoic aspect of the maternal apt to assail us as we pursue our personal archeologies? Does it threaten to invade us and operate within us—like a cancer: silent, invisible, ferocious—until we are consumed? Must we go there anyway? Marian thought we must.

Maurice Blanchot: “Reading is anguish, and this is because any text, however important, or amusing, or interesting it may be (and the more engaging it seems to be), is empty--at bottom it doesn’t exist; you have to cross an abyss, and if you do not jump, you do not comprehend.”

I want to extend what Blanchot calls “reading” (would it be “the experience of literature?”) to include the experience of cinema, and point out what may be obvious: that to take the risky leap does not guarantee that the abyss will be crossed without incident, or at all.

A Cano-centric bowdlerization of the first line of Charles Olson's *Call Me Ishmael*: "I take the LAND to be the central fact to man born in Canada, from the last Ice Age till now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large and without mercy." Unlike the American SPACE which is Olsen's concern and which is precisely space in that it exists to be occupied, the hostility of our LAND was and is unmasterable, impossible to fill up. It remains there, pitiless, pernicious, pristine (the Bowron clearcut and similar inanities notwithstanding).

It is well established that the landscape figures crucially in Canadian art, and critical discussion of Phil Hoffman's cinema has often embraced that thematic, and not without reason. Consider just about any of the films: the camera frequently dwells on fields, forests, rocky shores, horizons, even visually interrogates in close-up detail the elements that give the land its scape: bark of trees, surfaces of rocks, beach sand, tide pools, grasses and leaves, and so on. And Sweep, a film in part about cinematic forebears, opens with an Arctic landscape followed by some clips from a film called *On To Ungava*, which was the site of the limit-text of Canadian (we might as well say all) landscape film: Michael Snow's *La Région Centrale*.

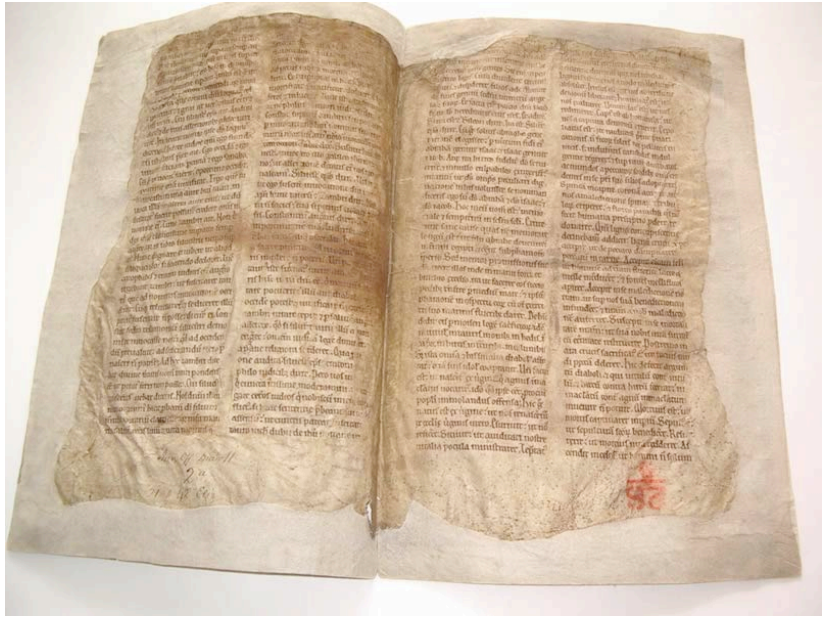
I recall that around 15 years ago, in a spurious gesture toward taxonomy (if not taxidermy), some wag came up with the idea that a particular set of stylistic features or themes (I forget which) could be discerned in a group of films which he designated by the major geographic formation near which the makers worked and/or grew up. It was called the Escarpment School, and in its uncontrollable sprawl eventually came to include, along with Hoffman's films, the work of Richard Kerr, Rick Hancox, Gary Popovich, Steve Sanguedolce, perhaps even Mike Hoolboom. Maybe there were others. I think that my own work was implicated. I'm fairly sure that this started out as a joke, but I can attest that I've since seen it referred to in critical articles of the most redoubtable nature.]

I am interested here not in the landscape, but in what appears in the landscape of Hoffman's cinema: something unsettlingly homely and

disturbingly familiar precisely in its brokenness, fracture and disjunction. An unapproachable, uncanny, impossible yet enabling fragmentation of the true, without which this, Hoffman's, or any truthful testimony would not be possible.

*Here lay our beautiful ship, a floating and dismal wreck,--which but a few minutes before appeard in all her glory, the pride and boast of her capt and officers, and almost idolized by her crew, with all sails neatly set and trimd to the breeze presenting to the eye the fac similie of a ship about to leave the harbour on a summers day under the admiring gaze of hundreds to witness such a scene.*

I can call it shipwreck.



When I taught filmmaking, I described it as a process of fragmentation, of dealing with the fragmentary. One used a camera and possibly a sound recorder to fracture the profilmic world into bits: decoupage. Through selecting, realigning, combining, adding to, superimposing, and mixing those bits one altered their contexts, gave them new power and meaning: collage. And by giving the bits a definitive arrangement, a final and intractable temporal order, one had a film: montage. I think this is a fair, though perhaps idiotically simplified, account of what filmmakers do, and I think it's more or less what Phil Hoffman does. But what Hoffman doesn't do is respond to the pressure toward an ultimate seamlessness in the final product. It's obvious from where this pressure comes; there's no need to rehearse its origins here. Hoffman responds, is responsible to, a different calling, a distinctly inexorable, though perhaps more discreet, demand.

A speculative etymology, in the manner of Blanchot: *the fragmentary asks a question* (*Ger. fragen*, to ask or to question).

If we give the name "reality" to that which corresponds to the field of the symbolic, to that which can be, precisely, symbolized, represented, given fully to experience, then it is the impulse of its other to which Hoffman responds. We can call this other "the real:" that which escapes or exceeds symbolization; the unrepresentable, the impossible, the fragmentary, the disastrous, the unconscious, the sublime; the singular. Perhaps it is not exact to speak of a response to this call, since it is unclear in what way it might actually be "heard." Say instead that one maintains an openness, an availability; a passivity before and beyond any possible activity. One is responsive by being responsible to and for one's own passivity which, although it resides with the subject, is encountered (passively, passionately) as if it were an exterior force; one suffers it, endures it and remains (by means of this passion, passively) available, open to the possibility of the impossible, the presence of non-presence, the inexhaustibly, intransigently other, the negative. Or, I will say again, the singular.

George Oppen: "The shipwreck of the singular."

Emmanuel Levinas: ". . . two world wars, totalitarianisms of the right and left, massacres, genocides and the holocaust--have already signified (if one can still speak meaningfully) an experience torn to shreds, one impossible to put back together. It also points out the failure of the 'I think'... doing its utmost to reassemble the fantastic of the real into a world. A defeat experienced not so much as a contradiction or failure of philosophical audacity, but already, as a cosmic catastrophe, like that mentioned in Psalm 82, 5: 'All the foundations of the earth are shaken.'"

When experience is already torn to shreds, what does the film become when it, when its maker (as subject), responds to the radical demand of what I am calling the singular? There is no need to repeat (unless we are, as I am, unable to avoid the compulsion to do so) that it cannot be seamless, cannot achieve a total closure; can't, in some sense, ever be wholly finished. It can't in any way pretend to be an imitation of life or a representation of reality. It can't look to the modernist consolation of formal purity, and it must stand on the other side of modernism's melancholy, nostalgia and regret. Instead, this is the cinema of the accidental stab, the innovative risk; it follows no rules other than the rules invented in the immediacy and responsibility of its every instance of making.

Father: "What is a catastrophe?"
Daughter: "The first stanza of a love poem."
(from *Passion* by Jean-Luc Godard)

Not documentary cinema, but the film as essay. And I take “essay” here in its full dump etymological sense: to try, to try out, to test, to test the value, to take a chance, to experiment (O.Fr. *essai*, *assai*, a trial; Vulg.L. *exagiare*, to weigh out; Late L. *exagium*, a weighing, a balance; and more speculatively, L. *exaggerare*, to pile up, exaggerate, from *agger*, pile or heap). In the film essay, it is not the fragment as an end in itself that is at issue (that would be modernist nostalgia); rather the fragmentary as the infinite heap of fragments, whether found or made. A cinema of the collection, the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir: elements of longing, but not a melancholic longing that abides incomplete, caught in the defensive web of desire; rather longing that motivates, that moves and impels, that tasks and heaps the maker in the making, invoking the unpresentable in presentation itself.

James Joyce: “Pity is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the human sufferer. Terror is the feeling that arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the secret cause.”

The encounter of desire with the beautiful arouses pity, gives rise to intelligibility, and leads the subject into the domain of knowledge (the symbolic). The (non-)encounter of the drive with the sublime arouses terror, gives rise to non-sense, and leads the subject into the domain of truth (the real).

If modernist cinema is a cinema of desire, whose affect is pity attended by pleasure, and whose nostalgia for some lost plenitude of the past leads to a melancholic (and so, in principle, incomplete) mourning for the trace of that loss in the ruined fragment as such, then I will say that the film essay exemplifies a cinema of the drive, whose affect is terror attended by enjoyment, whose mourning is accomplished in the future anterior, whose movement circulates, and circulates around, its fragmentary objects, and whose passive passion / passionate passivity gives itself as an approach and a witness to what will have been made. The film essay is in this sense postmodern.

Celan: *Neimand* / *zeugt für den* / *Zeugen*.

In Mexico, during the collection of footage for what eventually became *Somewhere Between Jalostotitlan and Encarnacion*, a bus on which Phil Hoffman was riding stopped, and a woman came screaming across a field. Her little boy had been run over and killed (by the bus?). Phil watched from inside with camera in hand, trying to decide whether or not to film. He didn't. He can attest to the event, he says it happened, but he doesn't have evidence to back up his claim because he didn't turn the camera on. Later, at the Grierson Seminar, Somewhere Between is screened, an entire film structured around the death of a child and the absent image of it, and a news correspondent who'd made a number of films about Vietnam approaches Hoffman: "Phil, I really enjoyed the discussion, but you know when you were in the editing room, didn't you just wish you had the footage?"

*I put the camera down*. The film is a cinemato-poetic account of an event, of the experience of an event, the evidentiary image of which is missing; the maker attests that it never existed, was never made, and does not reside undeveloped in some freezer. So what we have is his testimony. He testifies to what was apparent to him, to the visible, to what was available to experience: "on the road dead, lies a mexican youth"; " . . . the white sheet/ is pulled over the dead boy's body/ the children wept"; "the little girl, / with big eyes/ waits by her dead brother"; and he testifies to the unseen, the non-experience, as well: "the boy's spirit left through its blue." But he doesn't have the hard evidence, the documentary proof, for either sort of testimony: we know the camera never lies, but it's possible that Phil could.

For testimony to be what it is, to remain precisely testimony and thus retain its character as something other than a direct access to "truth," it must necessarily be haunted by what it excludes: the documentary evidence that we suppose never lies, but also, and more to the point, the possibility of the lie itself, of perjury, mistake or lack of fidelity. In short, testimony is inevitably haunted, even possessed, by the possibility of fiction. The witness is himself riven by this possession. His passion is a desire to avow, to confess without reserve, to bring forward an utter truthfulness in the face of the other's "Tell me everything!" But this passion is also to be understood as a martyrdom (Gr. martis, witness) in the sense of putting oneself on the line, making truth and bearing bodily witness to it through the attenuation of one's being, as martyrs bear witness with their bodies in dying; as passivity in its autonomic or heteronomic relation to the Law of Truth; as endurance of some indeterminate limit which invites the inclusion (potentially) of everything and is at the same time overwhelmed by this everything, raising the question of how to include by not including.

*They might for aught we could know have founderd during that awful night, and ourselves be the only survivors to tell the tale of woe. And we too might at any moment sink beneath this vast extent of ocean leaving scarcely a momentary buble to mark the spot or tell that we once was.*

*On our way to the death*. So I'm saying that experience cleaves the witness, foregrounding both the split in the subject itself (inside/outside, consciousness/the unconscious, desire/enjoyment) as well as a rift between what can be made available for public attestation and something else, some secret testimony, evocative yet incomprehensible: "the boy's spirit left through its blue." The elements resulting from this cleavage are radically asymmetrical and incommensurable; they threaten to engulf each other and the subject, are ruinous to any simple transparency in truth-telling, and bring the word "experience" closer to the disaster secreted in its etymological root (L. *ex-periri*, to try or test, to lead over or cross something perilous). The witness, as he testifies, feels the hot flush of color in his cheeks; the possible pride he might feel in doing his duty gives way to embarrassment, or further, to something else.

Primo Levi (on the arrival of Russian soldiers at Auschwitz on 27 January 1945, the definitive mark of the prisoners' liberation): "They did not greet us, nor did they smile; they seemed oppressed not only by compassion but by a confused restraint, which sealed their lips and bound their eyes to the funereal scene. It was that shame we knew so well, the shame that drowned us after the selections, and

every time we had to watch, or submit to, some outrage: the shame the Germans did not know, that the just man experiences at another man's crime, at the fact that such a crime should exist, that it should have been introduced irrevocably into the world of things that exist, and that his will for good should have proved too weak or null, and should not have availed in defense."

Levinas: "What is shameful is our intimacy, that is, our presence to ourselves. It reveals not our nothingness but the totality of our existence. . . . What shame discovers is the Being that discovers itself."

Shame is the lack of distance; too much intimacy, too much proximity, on our way to the death. It is precisely the lack of lack itself (our lack of lack of presence to ourselves). The subject has no other content than its own desubjectification; it becomes witness to its own disorder, its own fracture, its own rivenness, its own oblivion as subject. A double movement, both subjectification and desubjectification: shame.

*Having now consumed their last morsel of food the captain with his three surviving companions after a due consultation agreed to cast lots.*

Levi: "It is no more than a supposition, indeed the shadow of a suspicion: that each man is his brother's Cain, that each one of us (but this time I say "us" in a much vaster, indeed, universal sense) has usurped his neighbor's place and lived in his stead."

*The flesh of those unfortunate men constituted the only food of the survivors whilst it lasted*.

"If I make films instead of children, does that mean I'm less human?" (from *Soft and Hard* by Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville)

Father (not my father, but me, a father): "What is a catastrophe?"
Son (toothpick jauntily engobbed, eyes demonbright, gleeful): "Goddammit!"

Susan Howe: “Love changes besides he’s / damned . . .”

Date: Sun, 23 July 2000 23:14:09 -0500 (CDT)
From: <bmlaugh@southalabama.edu>
To: <mick@yhammer.com>
Subject: Re: your email

Dear M,
So what were MY reasons for wanting out of the situation? One reason was the atmosphere of gloom that permeated the household. Nothing ever seemed to create joy for you, and I was/am under the impression that to be happy is not one of your goals, and not one you would advocate for others.

Another reason is that I didn't see you taking much responsibility for your life—it always seemed to be up to me to make your life worth living. And as I've said before, I don't think that's an appropriate burden to put on another person, even if that person is your spouse. I felt very oppressed by the weight of that responsibility, and I don't think I'm one who takes the easy route. That is to say, I don't think I am a carefree, callous type who shirks accountability or responsibility, but I think what was being asked of me was unreasonable, and although I tried to take it on for a number of years, I just couldn't continue to do so. It was making me miserable.

I also felt that I was always on duty as caretaker, and that I never had an opportunity to be the sick one. It seemed to me that you were constantly complaining of not feeling well—feeling old, etc., as if your life were over—and so I never got any relief. I always had to be well. Perhaps that's why I lost so much weight in the early months of this year: I was sick myself but didn't have much of an opportunity to be so and then recover. And although I'm turning 41 tomorrow, I certainly don't think my life is over. It's still in high gear, and I want to continue thinking in those terms until I'm on my deathbed.

Another thing that was very troubling to me was our inability to communicate. There were moments, far too many of them, when I felt as if we were from completely different planets. Your reasoning/logic seemed to me to be upside down, or skewed so that there was no way for me to respond to it. Except with silence… which you hated, and which I hated, too, but I could think of no words that were up to the task.

I feel ridiculous saying all of this, because I've said it all so many times before that it seems completely shop-worn.

Well, I'll continue nevertheless.

Yet another thing I felt quite acutely was the lack of action that we took. I can't blame this on you because I felt a kind of inertia myself, but I HATED it. This may be ego discourse speaking, but I think I am generally a person who likes to take action. If I say I want to do something, I'm not just blowing hot air. I do it. Damn it, you must remember that there were times when I'd say, "Let's do this, or let's do that," and you'd say, "Not now. We'll do it tomorrow." But "tomorrow" never came. I couldn't stand the paralysis… the procrastination… the dwindling hope that anything was EVER going to get done.

Anyway, I hope you're beginning to recover from the horror of these events. There really IS a way to put it into perspective, if you want to do that, and there really IS a way to think beyond the (stupid) confines of a (stupid) institution such as marriage. As someone once said, "Don't live in the penitentiary. Try bemusement." Or, as I might amend it, "Try laughing heartily at yourself and your predicament on occasion." In fact, that's what I'm trying to do.

love, B

*Here she now lays, snatched untimely from her stateliness, into a mere shadow of what she was, and our selves deprived of the home which her goodly sides had so long afforded us.*

Roland Barthes: “Whenever you give anybody anything to read, you are giving it to your mother.”

Blanchot: “To be lost. To capsize.”

Date: Wed, 23 Aug 2000 19:09:46 -0400
To: bmlaugh@southalabama.edu
From: mick@yhammer.com

Subject:
Last night I had a particularly horrible dream in which I came to Mobile to see Jazzbo. You had several people staying in the house, including a young girl whose hands did not function properly and which were supported/contained within a web-like contraption that moved the fingers for her. When I finally spotted Jazzbo he was standing with his back to me and wouldn't answer me when I called his name. I went up to him and turned him around to hug him, and he was limp and thin and pale and silent and wore glasses and had moist swollen lips on an impossibly large mouth; he looked like an infantile Stephen Hawking. I was so shocked at this I immediately woke up, relieved that it was a dream, but stayed awake the rest of the night feeling awful, both because I had invented this, and also because it somehow meant that he was lost to me forever.

I don't know if I can stand this much longer. I have been thrown out because I no longer have any value as a husband or as a father. It’s still not clear what I have done to deserve having this judgment passed on me, and while I rationally know that neither of its propositions are accurate, I nevertheless cannot avoid buying into its "truth," at least on some level. This is having very damaging effects. I do not know if I will ever see Jazzbo again, but I do know that I will not be permitted to participate, in any important way, in raising him; I will miss seeing and helping him grow and develop and learn and I will be deprived of the pleasure and heartache of all that those things entail (and I know what that pleasure and heartache is). I can't understand what I did that made this deprivation necessary, and I do not see how it can possibly be construed as "best" for me, or for Jazzbo, although I guess I can imagine how you might see it being in your interest, though the only reasons I can come up with for that pertain to some version of your symptomology.

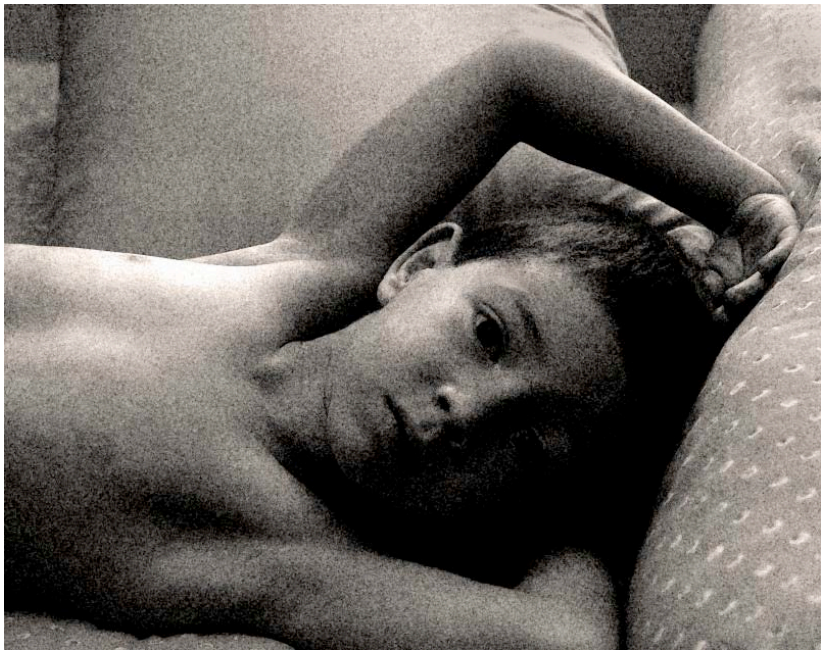
For me, this is a disaster in the fullest sense. I have lost my bearings completely, am totally separated from the star that ought to guide me somewhere. I tried very hard to act and to be OK, and was able to do that for a while, but I've lost it now and I don't know how or if I'll find it again. If there is some inherent gratification in shipwreck, I must be wallowing in it. There is little doubt that the drive seeks its fullest satisfaction in annihilation.

To shake things up, to "jolt" out of paralysis, would seem to me to be a preservative act, an effort to keep something alive, to prevent its loss. It would not be the way one would describe the termination of a marriage, of a family, especially when a child is involved, and when one's feelings can still be described as "love." I think your rhetoric betrays your confusion as to what you've done or are doing. Not that this inspires me with any hope.

When will I see Jazzbo again? It's been 2 months, already too long in some people's minds. Upon whom does the onus reside to facilitate my seeing him? Given the distance, and my present circumstances, it seems like a pipe dream, a fantasy. Do I want to see him? Yes, I want to see him, hold him, talk with him, kiss him, and love him and keep him near me until he's grown up. Is that going to happen? No. Why? Because you've decided it is better if it doesn't. Why? I don't know why.

Well, I don't know what to say beyond this. It's not easy to write anything. I'm not getting anywhere with the Phil thing, let alone writing to you. I can't sleep, I can't read because I can't see worth a damn. I can't stop crying so I'll just stop.
m

If I make children instead of films, does that mean I'm less inhuman?



The moment of inscription: I am in Buffalo in my tiny, boozesweat-besotted apartment, $325 a month including heat, of which there is either none or too much. It is Wednesday, 20 September, 2000, 7:34pm EDT. I'm listening to Blind Willie Johnson's "Dark Was The Night, Cold Was The Ground" (1928), perhaps one of the greatest blues recordings ever made, in part because it's postmodern avant la lettre. If you don't believe me, listen to it. Like Babci, Johnson lived through the influenza epidemic of 1918, and he wrote at least two songs about it.

Marguerite Duras: C'est un lieu de détresse, naufragé.

I am way late with this, but I'm distracted again (I almost want to say, distracted in the etymological sense, i.e. torn limb from limb). Yesterday after work I made a tape for Jazzbo on which I read some stories, and sang a few songs. His favorites, since he was a baby, are "Death Letter Blues" by Son House ("I got a letter this mornin', how do you reckon it read? It say 'Hurry, hurry, you know the gal you love is dead.'"), "The Greenland Whale Fisheries," and "Lord Franklin," about the shipwreck in the Northwest Passage.

It is stunningly pointless to say that I miss him. Somehow writing this makes the anguish more acute, as if he is in some way implicated in the domain of filmmaking; as if making or even writing about films somehow demands writing or making films about him. I guess that's how it was with Sam too. Once James Benning stayed at our house in Hamilton, and Sam made him a picture, a city seen from a distance, with the caption "Keep your eye on the brown structure." When I went to visit Jim in New York a couple of years later, Sam's picture was still on his fridge. Did you know that the boy flailing the stick through the dewy field in *passing through* is Sam? I'm his da now, but then I was his daddy.

Memory is always construction; a remembering, a re-articulation (in every sense of the term) of pieces, fragments, members. In some sense it raises the problem of the psychoanalytic “primal scene:” the moment of trauma invented as pure construction. One’s memory, what one remembers, becomes reified precisely as fact (*this* is what happened; I can testify), as the truth of the past, but it is everywhere and always founded upon, foundered by, the personal, the equivocal, the aleatory, the fictitious.

A certain fetishistic modality is apt to be entailed here in the visual domain of cinema, namely the instance of the (memory) image as such: plenitude, seamlessness, completion, talismanic charm, the maternal as ideal. The film essay, Hoffman’s films, operate to oppose this entailment; they seek to remain open to the rents, fractures, the “torn formations” that the fetishistic is concerned to elide.

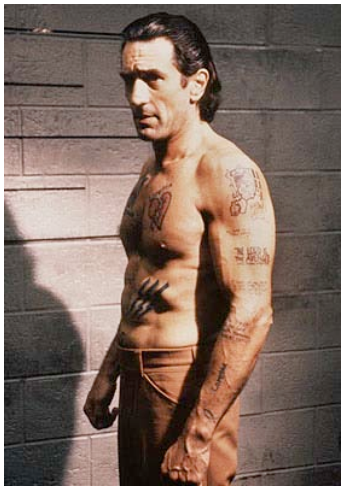
*Now could be seen the pale and wan features, the wild and vacant stare thrown upon each other and ever and anon, turning to view the fast receding remnant of the hulk, which had borne us so gracefully over the bosom of the ocean, as though it were possible that she could yet relieve us from the fate that seemed to await us, untill at last it sunk from our view beneath the horizon.*

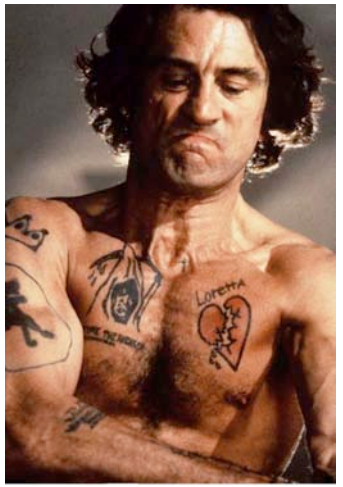
PH, speaking of *river*: “What ensued was the chaos of the trip.”

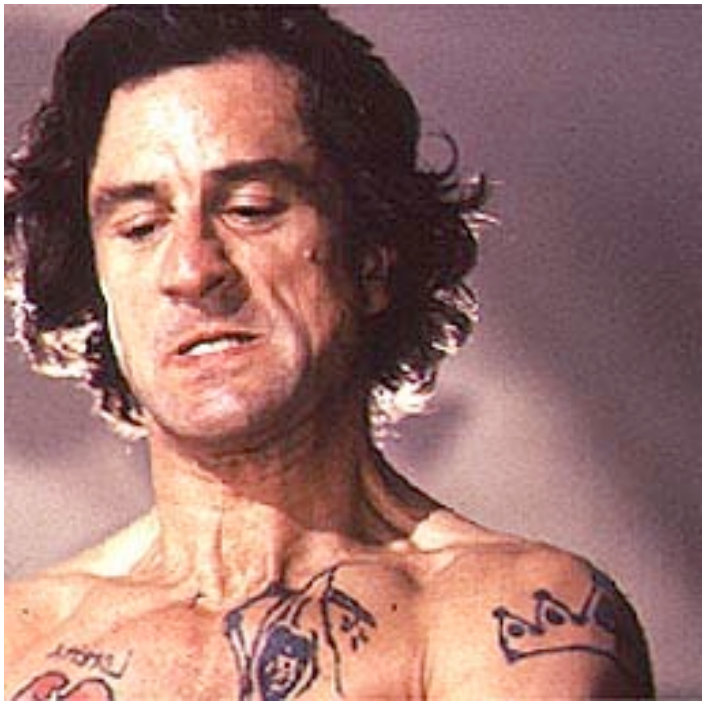
A chaotic memory trip, this journey toward what will have been mourning accomplished, because it is one not undertaken solely within the register of the visible and the tranquility of the fetish. Hoffman’s cinema frequently guides us in the direction of what is off-screen, beyond the dimension of the frame. “The possibility of mourning lies in the unseen.” (PH) And we might add: in the silent, the unspeakable, the ungraspable, the foundered.

A distinctive feature of the film essay is that it gives its viewers access to a feeling of its “aboutness,” but in such a way that any link between this “aboutness” and the manifest content of the film is broken, or at least seriously in question. Suppose I’m teaching a class dealing with, say, Martin Scorsese’s *Cape Fear* (which is, I would argue, a film essay and not in any way, except satirically, a nostalgic repetition of the “B” movie whose namesake it is), and I ask “What is this film about?” The inevitable student response will be some sort of plot rehearsal, and occasionally something involving a more synthetic rendering of the drama, but each of these begs the next question: “What is it *really* about?” The possible answers are manifold and varied, but all would demand a careful scrutiny of those elements of the film that are likely to be missed (that is to say, unrecognized as significant) by an unsophisticated viewer attending mainly to the “story” (for example, and not exhaustively: the framing of the narrative within the daughter’s “what I did last summer” class presentation; Max Cady’s invocations of Silesius, the Epistle to the Galatians, and “the book between Esther and Psalms;” the obviously fake wreck of the houseboat; the name of the houseboat: *Moana*, after the Flaherty film; the daughter’s encounter with Cady as a theatre arts teacher; etc.) Once attention is drawn to these elements, viewers are able to re-encounter them with new zest; the multiple vectors of the film are opened to interplay with whatever each viewer can bring to bear of his or her own intellect, emotion, experience, history in a voyage of interpretation and understanding which is not necessarily terminable. While this might prove another “risky crossing,” the subject is no longer wholly “at sea.”

The question “What is the film about?” is not, in the case of the film essay, to be divorced from the questions “What does the film do?” and “What can its viewers do with it?”







“Where I was born, you filmed.” (from *passing through/torn formations*)

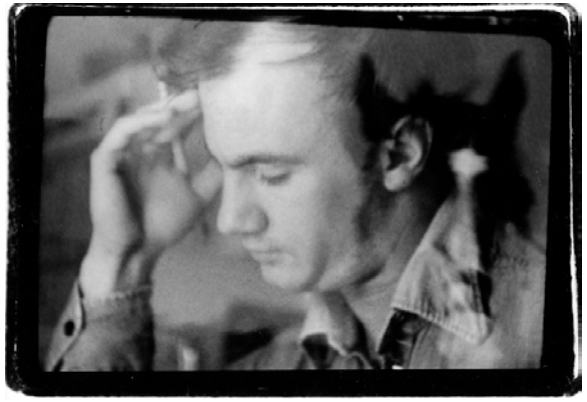
A primal scene? Somewhere east of Bratislava, a young girl romps along a fenceline in a steep meadow. Grown men are reaping, then stand to chat as they hone their scythes. The sexual menace that pervades here is only exceeded when the child enters a field and confronts a bull.

The male gonad: testis, testicle (L. testis, a witness {to virility}).

On tape, the girl speaks the Czecho-Polish dialect of this polyglot land. Hoffman’s mother translates, haltingly. “Where I was born, you filmed.” This girl could be her doppelganger, retracing the ground that Susie Kaczmarzyk trod in her own girlhood: one apparently fraught with penury, upheaval, illness, accident, leading eventually to emigration. When Sue returns after the war, she suffers “a hole in my leg that wouldn’t heal.” One night she’s awakened and obliged to dance the Cassock in her bedclothes before an audience of Russian soldiers. At the beginning of the film, Chris Dewdney’s voice over black leader: “The layers came apart easily.”

*We had travelled about three hours over the meadows and through the woods toward the hunting grounds, when we heard the most dismal howling set up before us, that can be imagined. We continued on our way untill we seemed to be approaching nearer and nearer the spot whence the dismal sounds came, when the two captains came to a full stop, looked at each other a few moments as though they wished to say something which each was ashamed to open first when they turned simultaneously around making good their retreat simply remarking that the walking was so bad and the sun so extremely hot they would return and take a cooler day for the excursion.*

The menace of sexuality gives way to the disaster of engenderment. There was a huge boil on Babci's neck while she was pregnant with Wally, "the boy born at the cone of our time's most explosive moment." The notion is put forward that one could be poisoned by history in the name of justice. Marian wondered if bad memories could cause illness. Like Blind Willie Johnson, Babci lived through the influenza epidemic of 1918. She wrote no songs, but contracted Parkinson's disease, the final stages of which she is suffering, comforted by her descendants, in the opening sequence of the film.



Wally, the wayward son, the blacksheep uncle, housebreaker, former deadbeat dad, accordion maestro, optics theorist, maven of the mise-en-abyme: "Are you taking a picture of us looking at the picture? . . . You're taking a movie of us watching a movie!" The mad genius constructor of the appalling "corner mirror," which corrects the lateral inversion of normal reflection, so that you can "see yourself the way others see you." He builds one as a gift for his daughter. We watch her struggle to put on makeup, her womanchild face bisected by the bead of solder conjoining the mirror's two panes; the vertical split-screen reverberating the pop-psych "schizo" trace of schizophrenia, possibly her father's affliction. Can a virus be transmitted if you see yourself seeing yourself (*en-abyme*) the way others see you? There's an eating sequence in *Destroying Angel* shot up at Phil's farm where Wayne is making dinner for Phil and Marian. "In the early 90s there was still such a fear of casual infection, you know, he could cut himself and infect us, but instead there's only celebration."(PH) How would others see you seeing yourself see yourself as others see you if you ate the poison mushroom?

Phil's trip to the motherland: the stop at Dachau with Zvia, the brutal silence of the *Muselmänner* ghosts who haunt the place provoking a wince at his patronym; the sudden violence on the Czech train; the encounter with the foreign relatives, the photos and the drinking and the amiable smiles and the eager messages to Susie; the recording of the story of Karol and Uncle Janyk. Was this legend of patricide the cryptic point of trauma for these family members scattered across two continents and four generations, each one of them, as Rilke would have it, "wet with the spittle of fate?" Can the poison of our secret histories invade us and operate within us—like a cancer: silent, invisible, ferocious—until we are consumed? Who can be a burrower, a grubworm? Marian thought we must.

Susan Susie Sue Kaczmarzyk Hoffman translates an aunt's or cousin's account of Karol's murder of his father. The words refer to the unspeakable; they point to a gap. She falters, hesitates; Neil Schmitz once told me that stuttering is a form of knowledge. There are "remains in her trembling speech. This is where our forgetting, and the things we care not to tell, come to reside."(PH) "And Karol shot Uncle Janyk seven times." The re-filmed black and white video image of Susie's face, distant, now close, closer, close-up, its motion slowed down, slower, slow, as she switches off the machine and turns aside in anguish. Who can watch this? Who can film this?

What's the difference between filming a death, and a cinema that by its nature, as Cocteau said, "films death at work?" Why is it so compelling? Why can I look at it forever? How can it be that it affords me some kind of feeling of comfort and peace? Is there something beyond the border of the frame?

Géricault's painting usually known as *The Raft of the Medusa* was actually called by its author *Scène de naufrage*, *Scene of Shipwreck*. I remember the press of the crowd before that picture in a gallery of the Louvre nearly thirty years ago now. What is the attraction, the fascination, of that image of disaster? My friend Pedro can't abide reading about the holocaust, about the camps; he is too much assaulted by the ordinary human capacity for extraordinary brutality. Why do I go endlessly back to Claude Lantzman's Shoah, to Levi, to Elie Wiesel, and so many others? Is there an arcane sadistic enjoyment at stake when we witness scenes of shipwreck, maritime and otherwise, from positions of (I'll say relative) security? Would it

be better to avert our eyes, stop up our ears? Do we or don't we put the camera down?

*The constant and vivid lightning seemed to envelope us in a fearful blaze, and the awful thunder of an angry element threatened every moment our final extermination.*

While on his deathbed, the maker of *Scène de naufrage* was asked to assess his masterpiece. He is said to have snorted with contempt: "*Bah, une vignette*!" Perhaps the unfortunate contemporary correlative of Géricault's painting is former Niagara Falls, Ontario resident James Cameron's *Titanic*. (Would he be a candidate for inclusion in the Escarpment School?)

To be human: to lend a voice to the inhuman.

Polyglot girlchild reclines in summerwhite meadowbliss. Whitenight brightsky, hicon sunsparkled haystalks. Firephantom ghostgirl upjumps from supine girlbody. Nightbright shadowgirl fencescampers rhythmrunning. Emulsionslash colorbursts. Lyric, recuperative doppelganger. "I fell asleep and dreamed."

Early in *Kitchener-Berlin* there is an image of a backhoe with the word "Zeppelin" painted on its arm. Then . . . a countdown leader: "The Amateur Cinema League presents . . . The Voyage of the R-100: The Highway of Tomorrow or How One Makes Two." The "first Canadian surrealist film"(PH) features the trans-Atlantic voyage of a rigid airship, with twin brothers documenting the trip from the air and the planetary surface. The ship arrives in Canada, "safe at last." "Twin brother comes to visit me and finds me still dreaming." These twin brothers, staggering in their indistinguishability, seem to communicate by telepathy.

Later, a phantom form rises from a sleeping twin. "Have you people seen all I have seen in my dream?" The words refer to the unspeakable; they point to a gap.

The psychoanalyst Nicholas Abraham describes the presence of the phantom as indicating the effects in the descendants of something that had inflicted catastrophe on the parents. The phantom is equivalent to the drive: it has no energy of its own; it pursues its work of disarray in silence; it eludes rationalization; it gives rise to endless circulation and repetition ("I don't have a drive to repeat.")(PH) If we are in possession of, or possessed by, the phantom, we are being haunted not by ancestral ghosts, but by our ancestor's secrets, the nature of which we do not know.

Sami Van Ingen, the great-grandson of Robert Flaherty, in *Sweep*: "What have I inherited?" The ancestral weight of Flaherty, maker of *Nanook of the North*, and perhaps only the most famous whiteman to go into the Canadian Arctic and impose his whiteness on it, has

compelled Sami to retrace his great-grandfather's steps to "somehow get even with who I am."

The headlamps of miners emerging from the shaft; candles in a cave; cave drawings; dinosaurs; the miners again. Finally a little girl in a red dress, an extenuated image, a phantom, "slips into the emulsion."(PH) From the rocky meadowhills east of Bratislava, a generation or two ago? Or is she the remnant of my mother's secret, or your mother's? Or ours, twin brother?

Hoffman's cinema resides, is at home, with the chimerical, the phantasmatic, the spectral, the anomalous; its economy touches on the touch of the untouchable (and with Cézanne it can say: "with each touch, I risk my life.")

Have you people seen all I have seen in my dream?

"Improbable accidents of an acausal nature, that is, meaningful coincidences, have entered the picture." (from *Sweep*)

PH: "The only guide I've had in my filmmaking are these so-called coincidences."

Blanchot: "The disaster: stress upon minutiae, sovereignty of the accidental."

*This day the wind has hauled to east south east, with torrents of rain falling, and at midnight had increased to an awful gale with a frightful sea, which seems to threaten our total anihilation.*

The moment of inscription, 2: in *Sweep*, Christopher Herodier, hotel manager and sometime second-unit cameraman, makes an offer to Sami and Phil. "Here are two pens. Write a story about me!" Herodier is a Cree filmmaker (*Chiwaanaatihtaau Chitischiinuu*) who understands, along with his French counterpart Robert Bresson, that cinema (even a cinema such as this which seemingly privileges decoupage) is precisely cinematography, a writing. But under whose authorship? And what could authorship be?

Herman Melville: "The names of all fine authors are fictitious ones."

Richard Kerr, Jim McMurray, Rup Chand, Conrad Dubé, Mark, Dan, Robert Frank, Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, Peter Greenaway, John Grierson, Tucker Zimmerman, Chris Dewdney, Babci, Drioux, Walter Kaczmarzyk, Sue Hoffman, Uncle Janyk, Karol, Saugeen, Karol Witoya, Dent Harrison, Twin Brother, Richard Massey Williams, Gerry Shikatani, Robert Flaherty, Dante, Sami Van Ingen, Christopher Herodier, Wayne Salazar, Mickey, Marian McMahon. Phil Hoffman. Boneyard of names.

"The taut spring wound tightly tight. Tight." (from ?O, Zoo! (The Making of a Fiction Film))

PH on *Chimera*: “The film doesn't insist that market people in Cairo's Khan Khalili and London's Portabello are the same, but that they share an energy related to colour, shape and form. That's why some of the film is abstract, to evoke these pleasures of sharing.”

Melville: “Masonry--and is it man’s? The lines of stone do not seem like courses of masonry, but like strata of rocks. . . These are the steps Jacob lay at.”

*Chimera*: cinema of intercontinental ballistic single-frame zooms, a film with no author at all, Hoffman suggests. A striking moment: Marian, sunshaded, in front of an Egyptian pyramid. Two modes of preservation, care for the departed. The layers come apart easily. “A terrible mixture of the cunning and the awful. It was in these pyramids that the idea of Jehovah was born.”(Melville)

“Do you chance to look out? Can you make a different picture? Image yourselves into a place that lets you speak to each other, and to others, more closely?” (from Sweep)

And if you do look out, what sort of look could it be? Neither a furtive glance, nor a close perusal, nor a wideband scan, nor a lonely masthead watch by night; but let’s say a reconnaissance. A risky crossing into enemy territory, a clandestine witnessing, a cracking of codes, a theft of secrets, perhaps the hard won validation of information already possessed. Reconnaissance: exhaustively translated as a knowing again that we are born together. Where I was born, you filmed. To evoke these pleasures of sharing. Marian thought we must.

Jacques Derrida: “Any testimony testifies in its essence to the miraculous and the extraordinary from the moment it must, by definition, appeal to an act of faith beyond any proof.”

Dewdney: “You are splashed by the other children, but move not.” (from *passing through / torn formations*)

Howe: “Peace thereafter / Rest fathom over”

*Pace* Wayne Salazar, not peace before we die, but peace thereafter—so that not we, but rather our secrets, don’t haunt the living after we’re gone. “The dead carry on longer than the living, and it seems that the force of a life lived is stronger once it ceases to exert itself . . . its silence and mystery . . . majestic.”(PH) Rest fathom over. Marian thought we must.

I can testify.

Melville, *Moby-Dick*: “So help me Heaven, and on my honor the story I have told ye, gentlemen, is in substance and its great items, true. I know it to be true; it happened on this ball; I trod the ship; I knew the crew; I have seen and talked with Steelkilt since the death of Radney.”

“I’ve never seen a whale.” (Richard Kerr in *Road Ended*)

*The gusts of wind were very hard and the night very dark, but our little whaleboat glided away like a thing of life.*

**********

[The passages in italics are from the Desultory Sketches of Thomas Nickerson (1876) who, at fourteen, was the youngest crew member of the whaleship Essex, stove and sunk by a sperm whale in the south Pacific, 20 November 1820.]

# Stet

It means “let it stand.”

Without explanation, for now. Instead, let me oblige you to indulge in the fantasy of a moment of inscription: imagine Phil Hoffman darkly embunkered in his digital basement, bringing to fruition several years’ hard work on his cinematic response to Marian’s death, a task whose already formidable cargo is further laden by an apprehensive public, friends and colleagues (and critics?) poised in anticipation, festival spotlight in the offing, book in preparation; and there is a deadline! And now consider that upstairs the bright world teems - new loves, new job, new life abundant, loud, alive, living on, waiting for Phil to join in, to live there too.

Under these conditions, how is the work of mourning even possible? How possible is the making of the work mourning demands? How could one manage the intimacy required, or the courage, or the vulnerability, or the generosity? How could one avoid distraction, and I mean “being torn limb from limb.” How could one endure the thought of all the scrutiny about to ensue? To say that the task would be daunting is hardly adequate. It would have to be unbearable.

Fortunately, we’re only fantasizing.

Merely daunting is the present task (an altogether different sort of fantasy): what sort of address is possible toward a work so personal, so charged with grief, so apparently non-political as Hoffman’s *What these ashes wanted*, and how can it meet the demands of its venue, a magazine about cinema but also about action, whose name inscribes a certain militancy, a politics? How can one avoid the temptation to offer a respectful bromide, especially given the tragic loss out of which the film is built. Is it possible to wish to celebrate this filmmaker, his films, this film, and yet meet the work critically, engage it politically? I don’t know the answer to any of these questions.

The last time I wrote about Phil's work, I employed the device of having an imaginary conversation take place as a sort of preface to the piece.[1] I think I was trying to be entertaining. In it, I used an expression that has wide currency among (mainly white) people in the deep south, where I was living at the time. It's an instance of what my friend Neil Schmitz would call "confederate discourse." I wrote: "I might could have a twin brother." Not surprisingly, a copy editor figured that I'd neglected to delete either the might or the could, and so deleted one of them for me. When I got the edited copy, I wrote "Stet" in the margin, and appended an explanation of the usage.

So when the book came out, and the deletion remained unstetted (yup, that's a word), I was hotter, as the Mobile gumbo-queens might say, than a black roux on a high flame. Editors were decried, publishers slandered. In retrospect, one sees how these things can happen, that nobody's to blame. Pressure of deadline. Mere oversight. Might could happen this time, too. But I hope not.

I like this phrase, this "might could," because it seems to combine (or let's say "confederate") notions of capability, possibility and intention, while subsuming them under the sign of doubt. It's not reducible merely to the sum of its parts; instead its meaning is disturbed by something which strictly is not part of it. It offers something while taking it back; it withholds while revealing. The statement "I might could help you clean up that kitchen" means, or could mean, something like "I'm quite willing and would like to help you clean up that kitchen, but only if you agree to it, I don't want to insist, not that you'd really need help anyway." There's a sense in which it's a more sociable, even more ethical idiom. At the same time, an advantage of "might could" lies in its ability to veil just about any assertion with a moderate ambiguity, and to leave the speaker at a certain remove from whatever he asserts, from any proposition about whose status he may not be entirely secure; not quite taking him off the hook, but leaving him a bit of squirming room, so that he may get off it eventually should he squirm to sufficient effect. Given that, consider what these statements might convey (or dissemble): I might could like to try that gumbo; I might could make a film about losing a loved one; I might could never forget you; I might could love you always.

You might could get it by now.

So to come, at last, back to the raft: despite my inability to answer the questions I posed above, I propose to carry on, insufficiently, with my merely daunting task to address, in this place, on this occasion, Hoffman's What these ashes wanted, but to do so under the rubric (if there can be such a thing) of the "might could."

To do so, and then to let it stand.

Here's one way of putting it: when a loved one dies, a hole opens up in the Real. A flood of images rushes in, as if to fill the gap. Mourning would work (might could work?) to marshal those images, to subject them, with no guarantee of success, to some form of symbolic constraint in a process not necessarily terminable since that gap, that hole, will have a persistence. In any case, we have a difficult, uncomfortable, unstable articulation of psychic registers: Imaginary, Symbolic and Real. The subject is in disarray, adrift, at risk even. Disastered, he no longer knows where to look to find the star that ought to guide him; no longer can he rely on familiar locators to let him know who it is that he takes himself to be. Is it any wonder that Freud described the process of mourning, with its dramatic intensity and hallucinatory hypercathexes, as resembling psychosis?

In her commentary on an earlier version of the film, Brenda Longfellow makes an astute point concerning the issue of the other's inscription in cinema.[2] Speaking of the sequence of Phil and Marian in the car as Marian makes her visiting nurse rounds, Longfellow writes:

...she confronts Phil (hiding behind his heavy 3/4-inch camera in the back seat), accusing him of not understanding how difficult it is to be filmed and how much the camera mediates and makes strange their relation. It is an important moment precisely because it honours the otherness of the other....[I]t anchors Marian in her lifeworld not simply as an image, idol or memory, but as a sensate and intentional subject in her own right, and one, furthermore, who explicitly defies the naturalness of a camera recording her image.[3]

There is another aspect to this sequence, however. Marian's complaint quite forcefully registers a valorization of the psychological (her feelings of unease regarding her place in front of the camera) over the physical (Phil's struggle with the heavy camera), a notion that she seems to regard as transparently the case, but whose validity hardly goes without saying; certainly it could be subject to dispute (to say the least, given the brute sovereignty of the physical in the region of illness leading to death). In addition, her protestations are a little excessive ("Oh Philip, you're nuts! You really are nuts! Sometimes I think you're so insensitive, really!"); once he explains, she becomes rather condescending, speaking to Phil as if he's a bit of a nob ("Well, that's a little different, you know. Do you understand the difference?"). Now it's true that all of this is carried on with good humor, and I'm not about to embark onto the terrain of how couples work out their private modes of communication. My point is that here and occasionally elsewhere, the film accords Marian some over-exposure, allows her to be presented in what may be other than the best light. Besides the idealization and aggrandizement of the lost other that might be expected, this film permits a certain aggressivity or even hostility to be advanced in her direction. That this may be so need not be seen as a weakness; it may be a sign of inconsistency or contradiction on the part of the maker (though I might could rather not speculate as to the specific operations of his psyche), but that would be something worth registering since it's something to which we are all likely to be subject. And that we are permitted to recognize Marian as some kind of imperfect creature, whether as a result of the irruption of someone's aggressivity or no, is part of the film's value; it provides a bit of purchase from which to resist (and to recognize the need to resist) the tendency to mythologize the lost loved one, to obliterate her faults, to reduce her in elevating her to the level of the ideal.

A black dog at loose ends, standing on a sidewalk; a kid on a front stoop conducting an imaginary orchestra (or is he a filmmaker quelling an applauding crowd at some festival awards ceremony?) This might could be what mourning is.

Though I met her the same day Phil did, I never had any extensive first hand experience of Marian as an intellectual, writer or artist. But I do remember an afternoon a year or two after they got together. Phil was out somewhere, and Marian and I talked for a few hours. I was going through some kind of a bad patch, as they say. She was generous and encouraging. I think it was the last time I spoke with her for more than a minute or two. I left that kitchen feeling quite uplifted, a feeling which lasted for some time afterwards.

What these ashes wanted, I felt sure,
was not containment but participation.
Not an enclosure of memory,
but the world.

The key phrase in the film's epigraph (something which Marian had extracted from the work of American poet Mark Doty) is the "I felt sure." Participation and the world rather than containment or enclosure (or incorporation) is not the other's desire, but arises within the bereaved. It is the mourner who does not wish to be enclosed (trapped, embunkered) within or by his memory of the lost loved one; the "I felt sure" operates to project these wishes onto the departed, concealing, in what would appear to be a gesture of generosity or sacrifice, a flight from or defense against the affect, anxiety, which threatens him on account of what may not be loss, but rather, excessive proximity. Photography, and thus cinema, always functions in the mode of bereavement (recall Benjamin, Bazin, Barthes, et al.); making a film such as this one, making it public, is a way of securing this projection, a way of keeping this (projected) pact with the other, and at the same time an effort at underwriting one's own defense. Thus Benjamin's beloved Kafka: "We photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds."[4]

This kind of "I felt sure" (under the sign of which the film proceeds) precisely bears the sense of the "might could."

In the sequence featuring a photograph from Guadalest, Spain, whose "dark surround" may house Marian's "after image," the on-screen text continues:

if I could brighten up this part of the picture
I might illuminate
the condition of her death
the mystery of her life
and the reason why
at the instant of her passage
I felt peace with her leaving
a feeling I no longer hold

Here it is in precisely the place of no information (the blank, silver-free part of the negative that allows all light to pass, thus giving black on the print) that the other, and the answer to her enigma, is sought. It is as if the subject knows without knowing that there is a constitutive failure inherent in his project, that it must fail in order to in any sense succeed: that is, to relinquish, to recuperate, to remain, to remember. And that photography (or cinematography) has a necessary relation to that necessary failure. In the mode of bereavement. I felt sure.

Her snow dance, the second version, black and white, high-contrast. The scratches, dirt and hair, visible splices, the slow bleachout as she skips away. This might could be what mourning is.

In the section called “Four Shadows,” an apostrophe to Marian (but which also, by its second person address, implicates, ensnares, the viewer), Hoffman replays a series of chance encounters with death experienced “not long before you died.” Crucial here is the figure of Hatshepsut, the female pharaoh, whose presence in the film implicitly but nevertheless forcefully identifies her with Marian. Because she was a woman, and to prevent her from living on in eternity, Hatshepsut’s name had been written out of Egyptian history, her image defiled, her body robbed from its tomb. And yet her story and her name have been recovered, her image reclaimed; now there’s a website promoting a biopic called “The Daughter of Ra”; the other day, Phil told me he’d heard that archeologists think they may have found her mummy at a recent dig. Hatshepsut oscillates, then, between presence and absence; her cartouche is both erased and legible; her crypt is empty and it isn’t. A strong, active woman (socially, intellectually, artistically), Marian had a pharaohic bearing; we might could say that in the film (the figure of) Marian is borne in the same oscillation as her ancient avatar, but with a twist. Neither presence nor absence, but some remnant, a something-other-than, is encrypted here; or better, resides here cryptically: that is, available, should we be up to it, for decipherment.

Two kids discussing an infestation of ladybugs, and the different varieties among the swarm. One relates an accidental squishing, to general amusement. This might could be what mourning is.

Your death is only available to me as your absence or as my loss. You are gone, outside me, and are now nothing since I am consigned to memory, to mourning, to interiorization. But this death that I cannot know, your death (or my own?), makes my limit apparent in my obligation to mourn, to remember, and thus to harbor within me something that exceeds me, is other than me, and is outside me: a remnant of your intractable absent otherness. In me without me, your trace. Without which no “in me” at all, no within to me. Your absence, irrevocable, carves me out, hollows me, leaves me with your trace, which is other than you. Else but that other, I relinquish. What remains, non-totalizable, non-composable, is fragment, scrap, ort, morsel. Them I savor, mourning.

Hoffman’s practice is to work with leftovers, scraps, and the mode of his work is fragmentary. His approach is from the margins, and features the marginal: this grandmother; that body on a Mexican road; this twin and his brother; this one, this very one I loved, lost. It can be excruciating at times. There are even occasional bits that stick in the craw, refuse to be processed (for me, this time: Hasselhoff.) But in general, what it preserves, harbors, secretes, what opens in it, what swoons and ranges and percolates and dodges in this broad corpus is surprising, rich and deep. The work exceeds itself, is more than what it’s made from, and becomes itself its own trace, its own remnant. Available for decipherment. At a theatre (not terribly) near you.

More Egyptology: during the filming at Hatshepsut's mortuary temple, the zoom barrel on Hoffman's lens jams, we are told, and later the camera stops working altogether. What gorgonizing Medusa's gaze has come within its field of view? It is not absence that makes the dead so disturbing to encounter (Hoffman's claim that each of his encounters made death "less strange" doesn't seem to me altogether plausible given the details); it's that the dead are somehow all too present, even too enjoying, we might say. Instead of lack, we come into contact with a lack of lack, a non-positive over-abundance exceeding our capacity to grasp it, and it provokes a petrifying anxiety. I might could make a film about a lost loved one, but to do so means that the apparatus itself will stiffen and break, that what I wish to record will utterly resist presentation; and it turns out that I can (and perhaps should) only avert my gaze, and in so doing merely mark the (lacerating) place/trace of what was to have been my subject.

The brilliant poetic reduction of the young Polish cousin in passing through/torn formations ("Where I was born, you filmed") re/deformed here (chiasmatically; under erasure perhaps) as "You filmed, whereon my trace was born(e)." This might could be what mourning is.

One of a number of beautiful, singular and compelling images in the film: sunlit Marian walking behind a line of columns at a temple of Horus, image replaced by shadow, not-presence and not-absence, and trace. A haunting. Mike Hoolboom's voice on the answering machine, delivering another potshard, a find from his dig:

In a later century, someone dropped and broke the cup, but it was too precious simply to throw away. It was repaired, not with glue, but with a seam of gold solder; and I think our poems are often like that gold solder, repairing the break in what can never be restored, perfectly. The gold repair adds a kind of beauty to the cup, making visible part of its history.

It's a comforting story, but there's another version: you might could never gather up all the pieces; one or two wind up down the cold air return or the sinkdrain, never to re-emerge. Some bits are so tiny you can't see to pick them up; eventually they're carried away by swarms of ladybugs. The molten gold solder drips on your hand, searing into your flesh, working its way through your system till it's lodged in your hot heart. The cup is repaired with Scotch tape and rubber bands, and you put it at the back of a shelf. Every time you happen to see it you're stiffened with an anxious rigor, and look away. This, too, is part of history. Is it visible?

Now think of Auden’s meditation on Breughel's Icarus in “Musée des Beaux Arts” (with the son of Daedelus a figure both of the lost loved one and the artist who tempts the limits of the possible, flying too close to the sun):

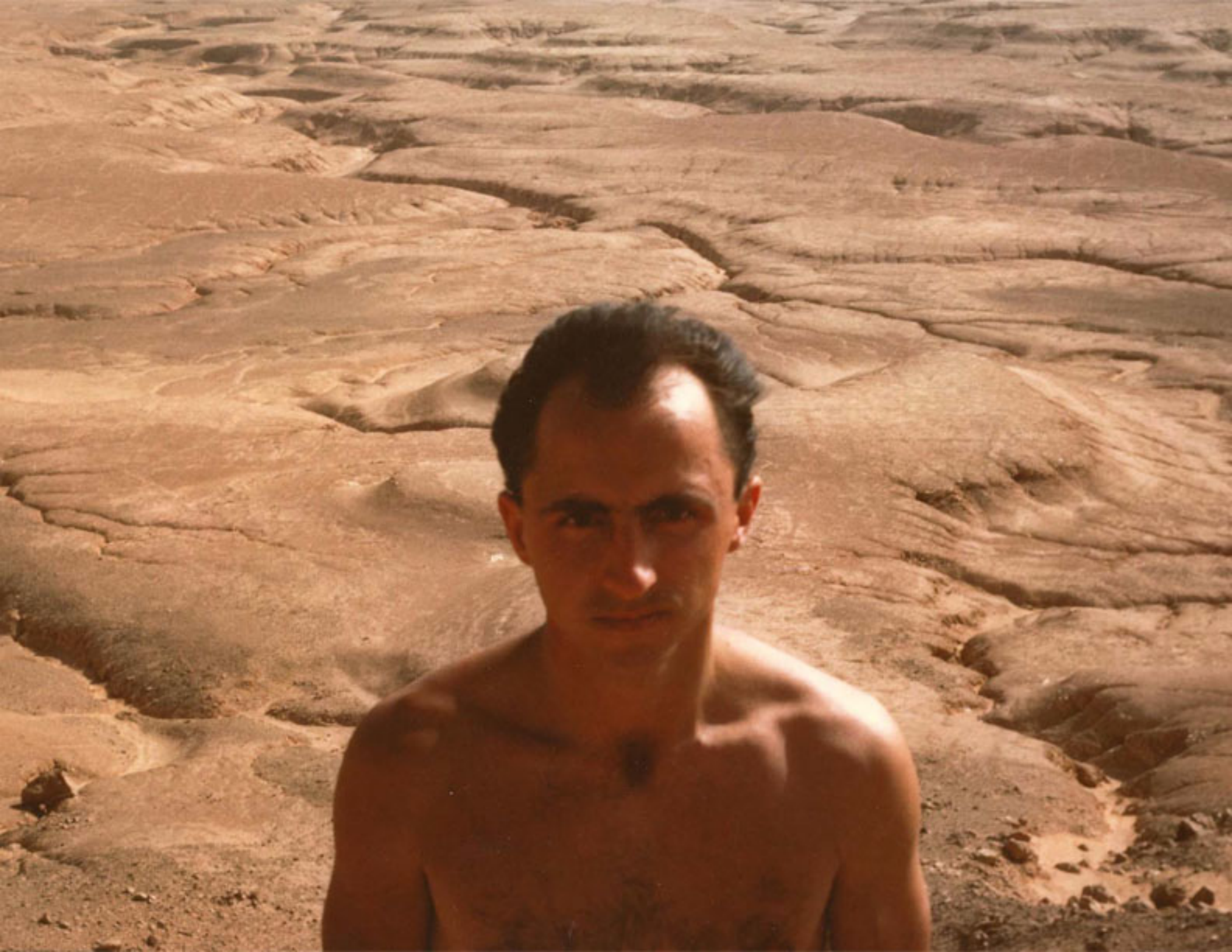
...how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the plowman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

New loves upstairs, loud alive in the brightteeming day. This might could be what mourning is.

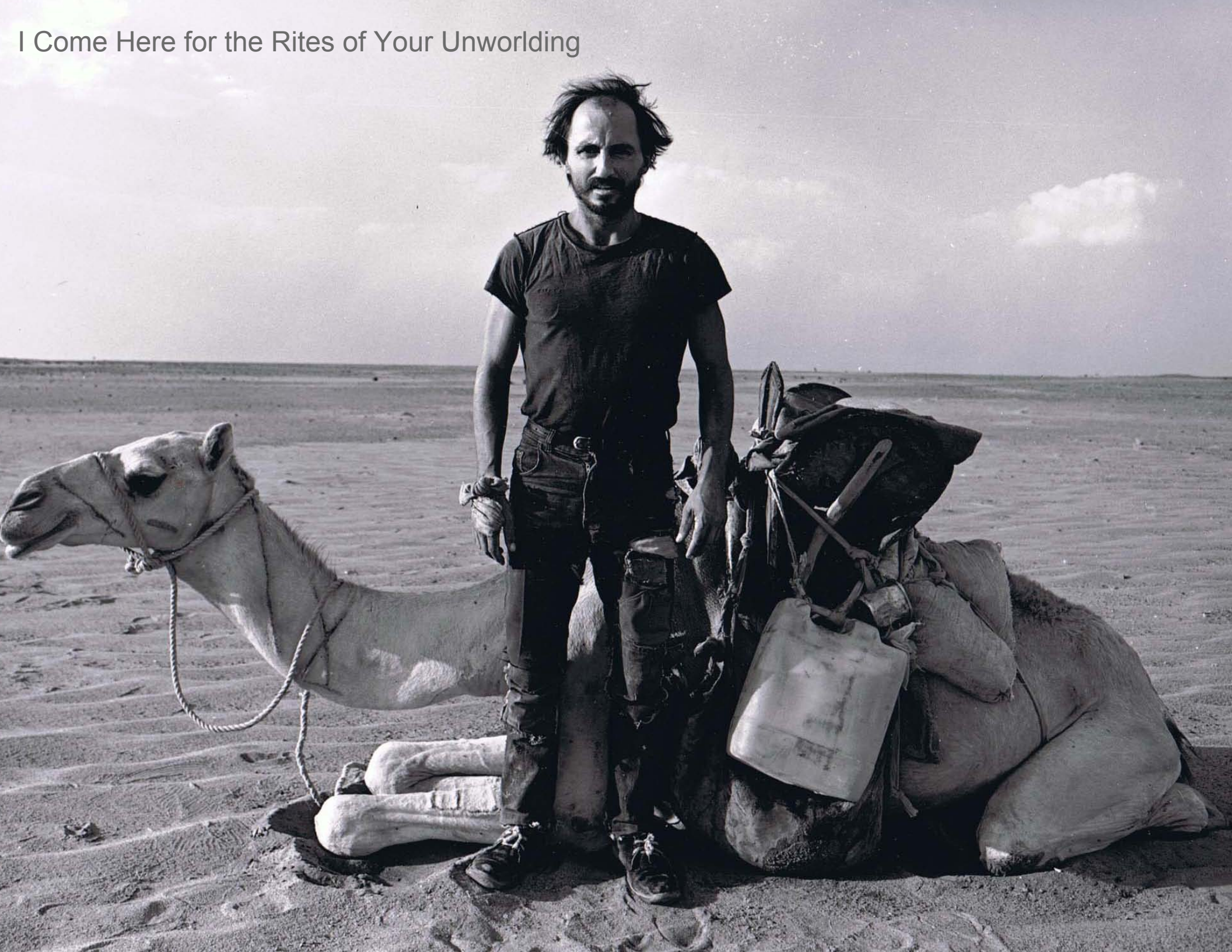
Perhaps in What these ashes wanted we have seen (at least the remnant of) something amazing. We might could sail on. And in the wake of the final frame, one word:

Stet.
It means “let it stand.”

1] Mike Cartmell, “Landscape With Shipwreck” in Landscape With Shipwreck: First Person Cinema and the Films of Philip Hoffman, ed. K. Sandlos and M. Hoolboom. Toronto: Insomniac Press, 2001, pp. 222-244.
[2] Brenda Longfellow, “Philip Hoffman’s Camera Lucida” in Landscape With Shipwreck, pp. 201-210.
[3] Ibid., p. 207.
[4] In Gustav Janouch, Gespräche mit Kafka. Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1968, p. 54.



I Come Here for the Rites of Your Unworlding



A man is crossing a desert. He is crossing the desert, and he is alone. He is riding a camel, alone, crossing the vastest desert in the world.

*****

He is crossing the desert. His journey terminated by police in eastern Chad, due to the risk of fighting nearby, he finds himself drawn to the hospital. Drawn, he says “to the struggle of life over death.” Surgeons treat a person wounded in the conflict, and perform a rather perfunctory C-section, hauling an infant by the throat into the world. The child would be about 18 now, if indeed it has survived the inexhaustible brutality of a world in which the category “children” intersects massively the category “victim.”

And the category “killer.”

This sequence occurs in a section the title of which powerfully resonates for a viewer in 2008: “El Fasher, Sudan” – the capital of North Darfur. No doubt children are being rudely born there too. Reaching El Fasher will for the first time lead him outside the Sahara, because taking the outside route will be more hazardous, and thus he “must take it, on principle.” This is one of the marks of the resolve and determination which anger and frustrate local officials, and which he bears as a point of pride. Whatever waiver is necessary, he will gladly sign it. Danger will not cow him; it is precisely what he seeks, what the journey is about. Going outside the Sahara is beside the point because the Sahara is beside the point.

*****

It has not been easy to write about the film of the man crossing the desert.

*****

*I see a word approach the desert.*

*It is not the word Sky or the word Earth. Neither the word Sand nor the word Seed, but the word Nothing, the word Void.*

*The desert confides only in the desert.*

*You realize and you do not realize you are disappearing.*
*(after Edmond Jabès)*

*****

A man is crossing the desert. I wish I could see him as a mythic creature, embodying the universal, containing multitudes.

I would hear him declaim:

I am the color of vastness.
I am the burden of solitude.
I am the tortured camelhoof.
I am the milky wellwater.

I would separate him from his maker, about whom I know little, almost nothing, and about whom I presume to say nothing, or very little.

He would declaim:

I am the throat in thirsting.
I am the ruin and the shoring against ruin.
I am the prisoner and the prisonguard.
I am the boil in blister.

He fascinates, enthralls. Like a knight in some old-fashioned book. Not because he’s undertaken the arduous, heroic journey, but because he’s tilting at windmills. Well, not exactly: it’s more complicated than that.

And he declaims:

> I am a beetle for burrowing.
> I am a seeker for hazard.
> I am a bloated donkeycorpse.
> I am a message that stuns me.
> I am a torn trouserpocket.
> I am a scorpion.

In Niger he receives an unexpected note from a French soldier (a Légionnaire?) stationed somewhere in the area. Its telling locution, improbable in address, impossible of response: “I hope you’re alive.” If only it were that simple.

I repeat the *beau geste* of its salutation, and call him “Franck.”

And Franck declaims:

> I disappear as a camelpath.
> I flatten as a desiccated carcass.
> I carry the ashes.
> I am lost and guide the lost.
> I am vacuous as the featureless landscape.
> I go on ahead.
> I sleep apart, alone.

*****

Once another man, a younger man, a very young man barely become a man was crossing a much smaller desert. He rode a old beat-up bus not a camel. I was that man, and can recount my own paltry desert experience: Somewhere between Lashkar Gah and Qandahar in Afghanistan, the bus had stopped at a watering hole, an oasis you might say, and everybody else had gotten off to relieve themselves, to get a drink, or to stretch their legs. I don’t know why but I stayed where I was, on a seat at the very back. It was ridiculously hot. A man appeared at the front of the bus and began to move slowly toward me.

Perhaps because of the heat, perhaps because it was Afghanistan, the rest of this, actions and thoughts, seemed to take place over a weirdly extended duration, as if in slow motion. I supposed that the man was a beggar. This was a rote response; beggars would get on the bus at every stop. But this man was different. He was dressed in blue, almost a skyblue (certainly not typical), his dhoti and turban were very clean (unusual for a beggar), and of fine fabric, silken, almost shimmering. He wore a blue silken cloth, a kind of veil, over the entirety of his face. The cloth was or seemed to be slightly moist. He came slowly down the aisle. There was a dawning double recognition that the man was about to show me what was under the cloth, and that I did not want to see it. My field of vision began to narrow and darken. I felt a swell of anxiety. I fished in my pocket for whatever change I had, and held it out at arm’s length, saying something—pointless, pathetic—in hopes that he’d let me be. He came slowly forward. He took the money, made a wet throaty unintelligible sound which I for some reason interpreted as an expression of disgust, and turned to go; then he stopped, turned slowly back, and with a sort of flourish, removed his cloth. The movement of my scalp was palpable. I was barely 19 at the time.

This is the only way I can put it: the man had no face.

*****

“Distance is blue” said Tennessee Williams. I heard this from a colleague during a critique session at Ryerson many years ago when a student’s photographs of a desert landscape were at issue. The line is from Williams’ play *Camino Real*, occurring in the opening scene; the stage directions describe the first character who enters as being “dressed like an old ‘desert rat’.”

> *Quixote [ranting above the wind in a voice that is nearly as old]: Blue is the color of distance!*

*Sancho [wearily behind him]: Yes, distance is blue.*

Blue is also the color of nobility; Quixote goes on to assert that one should have a bit of blue ribbon about one's person, tucked in what remains of one's armor, or borne on the tip of one's lance. It would serve "to remind an old knight of distance he has gone and distance he has yet to go . . ."

At this point Sancho mutters "the Spanish word for excrement."

*****

"I loved my grandfather. I'd have faced death for him if it meant he could live." Is this selflessness? Or the extremity of egoism? Or is it merely ordinary melancholia? On the border, as Freud says, of psychosis to be sure, but ordinary nevertheless, something most of us have experienced.

When a loved one dies, the loss is a hole that opens up in the Real. A flood of images rushes in, as if to fill the gap. Mourning would work to marshal those images, to subject them, without guarantee of success, to some form of symbolic constraint in a difficult, painful process of indefinite duration, not necessarily terminable since that hole, that absence will persist. It is not uncommon to seek to short circuit the process, and thereby circumvent the pain and difficulty, by means of a fantasy of exchange: "rather me than him." This fantasy also serves to assuage the guilt associated with loss: "why him rather than me?"

In Franck's case, the profundity of the fantasy is writ large, since his offer of exchange is, on the face of it, so ludicrous. Why should a young man in his prime wish to die in the place of one so sick, frail and so very old? And should the exchange be made, of what sort of life would Fred Howard be in possession? He would continue to be very old, frail and sick, still at death's door, soon to cross the threshold, and Franck would be dead. Unless Fred became Franck, assumed his life entire. But there's nothing rational about fantasy: it's unconscious and the unconscious doesn't obey the rules of rational thought, and so we're obliged to take Franck seriously. His ingenuousness in exposing his pathology is one of the reasons his film is so compelling, at least to me.

*****

“It was my grandfather’s death that made me decide to cross the Sahara Desert by camel.” This is given as the founding moment of the journey, and thereby of the film. No connection is established between grandfather and Sahara. Later we do see a photograph of a young boy, presumably Franck, mounted on a camel, but its provenance remains obscure. It eventually becomes clear that the Sahara is not the issue; it might as easily be the Arctic, some mountain, the bottom of the sea. What Franck wants is a trial, and his adversary will not be the landscape or environment, but death itself.

Franck is animated by, or perhaps at the mercy of, anxiety. I’ll say this without presuming to know its specificity for him. He mentions particular moments of anxiety throughout the journey, but its most fundamental aspect is blocked, utterly occluded. We are twice given the images of the grandfather shaking in his hospital bed: frail, helpless, he is in the throes of death. The second longer version has Franck walk from the bedside to the camera, apparently to turn it off.

Anxiety surges up in the presence of the dying person, in the presence of the cadaver. “I will be that” is its simplest formulation. We can parse it more subtly: the corpse establishes an uncanny relation between here and nowhere, between personhood and mere materiality; the other has been immobilized thus, and I know his demise in the silence I feel in my soul when I find myself continuing to address my private thoughts to him from whom my distress recognizes that henceforth no response shall come; the cadaverous presence instills in me the foreboding of a death that shall not pass me by; I am mortified by the “unbearable image and figure of the unique becoming nothing in particular, no matter what.” (Blanchot)

In Franck’s world, we have instead the personification of death as a master against whom it is possible to struggle, against whom one can test oneself (if the test is sufficiently severe), and against whom one can, presumably, prevail. A master whom one can utterly vanquish if the trial is onerous enough.

A master whose secret name is Fred and who lives in a little glass bottle with a cork on top.

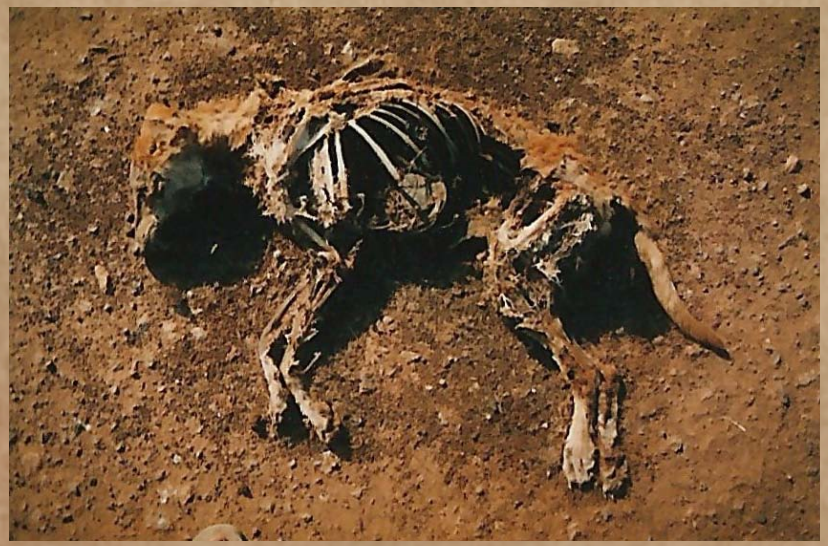
*****

Is it beside the point to mention that cinema in effect “cadaverizes” its human objects? To recall, after Bazin, Barthes and others, that its basis in photography entails a process of preservation, of embalming? Mummification: a desert technology. Part of what is so productive of anxiety, so remorselessly uncanny, in the images of Fred’s death throes is that their persistence is guaranteed; we can always return to them, must always return to them, in the endless repetition without variation that is the cinematic form. The other part stems from Cocteau’s slogan that the cinema “films death at work.” In some sense we see this process literalized in Fred, who appears as an elderly but relatively healthy man, as a dying man seemingly moments away from the end, and as a box of cinders. But death works in cinema’s essential temporality, in the mere succession of frames one after another; death comes creeping in the moment it takes Franck to say: “I loved my grandfather.”

A man crosses a desert. He crosses a desert, then comes back and makes a film about a man crossing a desert. Then he crosses the desert again and he doesn’t come back. We shall go to him, but he shall not return to us.

The obsessional neurotic's question, Franck's question, is (at the level of the *unconscious*: I am underlining that word) "am I alive or am I dead?" Being dead means being utterly outside enjoyment; enjoyment which is concentrated in, embodied by, a monstrous other, a master. Being alive is the position of mastery; it is an excessive, all-too-enjoying, obscene aliveness, which overcomes the very register of lack, which is therefore the very lack of lack. A position of mastery which overcomes, or obviates, or erases, or annihilates death itself.

The paradox here is that, in Franck's fantasy, the position of the troubling, uncanny, obscene aliveness that annihilates death is occupied by Franck's only master, also death. Death is a master from Ottawa, in a corked bottle lying in its custom compartment in the camera case, and it is death that enjoys, death that exceeds, death that is truly alive.



"I forced myself to become a recluse, to become a person so alone that I could never be crushed by loneliness." Thus Franck's justification for the annihilation of the other which is one of the defining traits of obsessional neurosis. But in the "Preparation" section, there is a drift into perversion, mostly in the form of fetishism, as well. The pervert is the one who works unceasingly for the enjoyment of the other, and the one whose outlook is unmitigated certitude. The "Preparation" section is fetishistic in style, with the high-con black and white, the heavily and obviously foleyed sound effects, the minimalist staging, and it contains multiple and thoroughly eroticized fetish items: the dagger, the belt and buckle, the naked chest. Finally, the bottle is filled with the grandfather's ashes.

Fetishistic belief is structured in the form of repudiation: *I know very well that* this is merely an ordinary bottle containing cinders, *but just the same*, it is for me the very substance of my lost loved one. And since it is the very one, the very other, my very master whose obscene living enjoyment compels my journey in the first spinning place, it must accompany me, guide me, protect me, preserve me as I seek to overcome my foe in holocaustic utter burn. Consumption, consummation. Devoutly to be wished.

At the same time, as it is the master it is my foe, it is what I needs must overcome, burn utterly. In being alive I am only dead; I am nothing, I am going nowhere, better I should be dead than him. In being dead he is unbearably alive, intolerably enjoying; he is everything, he will take me across millions of meters of desert, he overcomes and in overcoming must be overcome, I must become him. I must be the one who says "I am become death, destroyer of worlds."

A couple of years ago, during one of innumerable car rides between Mobile and Buffalo, I told Jazzbo the story of the man in the skyblue dhoti. This unleashed a 10 week barrage of questions (a barrage which has since dwindled to occasional sniper fire, but which, I fear, will never exhaust itself completely) because, as to my chagrin I eventually understood, the story has a structural and necessary lack in it, a fundamental incompleteness. The questions boiled down to one, really: what did his face look like? I can only say he had no face, even though I saw something; it seems beyond my capacity to describe what I saw except in terms of a nothingness. The story and its meaning had become, for me, a kind of metaphysical fable (lack of face = effacement = loss of self, of personality = loss generally = death) but try telling that to an eight year old.

*****

When Franck initially mounts his camel and sets off down the road in Mauritania to begin his journey, waving back at a local man (and at the camera), he resembles Don Quixote in those famous illustrations (Matisse?). Shortly afterward, there's a shot of him crossing the frame left to right, in which he's the spitting image of a version of Sancho Panza that I think I saw as a doodle by Nabokov on one of the manuscript pages of his Cornell lectures on the novel.

*****

Thinking is effacement, it attenuates the ego, edges toward the abstract and the general which is to say, the human. Despite death's register outside experience, despite any locus of inquiry that might be canvassed for actual accounts, despite the resistance of death to symbolization as such, it is possible (if not necessary, if not absolutely (yes, pun intended) vital) to think it. Franck's thinking, however, amounts to little more than a vague articulation of his foundational fantasy (and it is worth bearing in mind here that whenever we enunciate the unconscious we inevitably render it vastly less complex and over-determined than it actually is): I am haunted by death; my fear of death summoned me like a calling to the Sahara; I will confront death; I will fight back; I want life without death. Far from effacement, this approach places the self at the center of the business, lets it loom large: we are repeatedly given Franck's face, or part of it, in close-up, to read the plainly written truths upon it.

The desert landscape, which he calls "featureless," is a garden of delights that quite properly ought to beckon to one, ought to compel an interested party to journey into, through and even across it. But from the moment he sets foot on the sandy Mauritanian beach, everywhere Franck (or his camera) looks the desert is covered with carcasses, flattened, desiccated, inert. Franck makes no grave metaphysical judgements. He simply makes a grave.

*****

"Still haunted by death, nine years later he returned to the Sahara." It may be that I'm being too harsh in judging what may only be a tarnished and commonplace cliché. Perhaps we are merely witness to the harnessing of an inchoate but ineluctable response to an inevitable but occluded reality, like the awareness of equilibrium revealed at the moment we lose it.

But I don't think so.

In my view (contorted as it may be), this being "haunted by death" is either not as transparent and readily digestible as one might hope, or else it is far too transparent, and party to that species of "personification" or "anthropo-morphization" that exists simply to render its object (death in this case) completely outside real intelligibility. It might be palatable, even comforting, to metaphorize death as an adversary against which we can struggle and even prevail, but we require (do we not?) art to give us something more. If this only is the result of the real enough encounters with death that the film depicts, if it is the limit of the insight to which those encounters give rise, then one would prefer it if *Life Without Death* was *actually* a film about a man crossing the Sahara desert alone by

camel. It can only be imagined how a rigorous contemplation of (the full scope of) the desert landscape, its hideousness and its beauty, its proximity and its distance, its history and future, as well as a consideration of other obvious themes such as solitude, the journey, its risks and rewards, art, loss (there are no doubt numerous others), and even (dare I say?) an actual engagement with the Saharan people, might have produced a film in which the journey, the desert, and Franck in it, could be seen directly and without let.

*****

*To philosophize is to learn how to die.*
*(Montaigne, after Seneca)*

*****

Death eludes comprehension. It is what we cannot take hold of, what on the contrary comes to take us. That is, to take *me*.

If death is incomprehensible, it is not because it is invisible or intangible, unobservable, nothingness; it is because it is radically, irremediably singular. Ungeneralizable and therefore unconceptualizable, it is not unintelligible but rather the first intelligible, eminently understood in all understanding.

The understanding of the singular death makes understanding real, for all real beings are in the singular. What is intelligible is not first a singular being, the being that exists in the first person singular, but the singularity of nonbeing, the incomparable and solitary absoluteness of nothingness unrelentingly closing in *on me.*

Nothingness cannot make sense, make itself sensed, except as a singular and unrepeatable catastrophe, in the specificity of my own destination for it.

*****

*Don Quixote's misfortune is not his imagination, but Sancho Panza.*
*(Kafka)*

*****

The world is not a shelter from death; it is neither an arena within which we are to struggle against death. On the contrary, death is everywhere in the world; it is the world itself. The end, nothingness, is everywhere latent, and in opening the door upon the landscape of the world I open it upon the abyss.

In advancing down the pathways of the world, I very certainly go to my death. With one and the same movement existence projects itself, fascinated, into the world and projects itself, anxiously, unto its death.

The movement of existence is not the stalwart advance of some shining knight upon his steed, armed with a lance tipped with a ribbon of blue, shielded by a perverse certitude; it is, as Heidegger puts it, a groping.

*****

Kafka's fragment, "The Truth About Sancho Panza," deserves quotation in full, as it is so delightfully brief:

> Without making any boast of it Sancho Panza succeeded in the course of years, by feeding him a great number of romances of chivalry and adventure in the evening and night hours, in so diverting from himself his demon, whom he later called Don Quixote, that this demon thereupon set out, uninhibited, on the maddest exploits, which, however, for the lack of a preordained object, which should have been Sancho Panza himself, harmed nobody. A free man, Sancho Panza philosophically followed Don Quixote on his crusades, perhaps out of a sense of responsibility, and had of them a great and edifying entertainment to the end of his days.

Here Don Quixote, lost though he may be, is only a puppet. It wasn't he who spent a lifetime reading tales of knight-errancy and losing himself in febrile daydreams. Rather it was Sancho, who quickly grasped that those tales, with all the demons they aroused, would kill him in short order. And since Don Quixote didn't exist, Sancho had to invent him. Don Quixote was the name Sancho gave to the demon that dwelt within him, and whose destructive rage he required to "divert from himself."

Once the demon had found a name and become a character, its excesses no longer had to be suffered. Instead, Sancho could observe it from a certain distance.

Distance is blue.

*****

The impotence of my death discloses to me my impotence with regard to my birth. Destined to death, delivered over to being: such is the specific nature of my passivity, the passivity of existence, affected by things and afflicted with itself.

To be delivered over to being is to be delivered over to death. It is to be subject to things, not only as a subject in which their refracted attributes can inhere, but subject to them, exposed to their forms and their qualities but also to their force and their aggression, mortified by them. It is an essential mortal structure that is expressed in our taste for the colors, our ear for what is intoned across the fields of being, our appetite for the honey and the lees of the day.

*****

So Don Quixote, personified raging demon, undertook "the craziest exploits." Sancho was free to resume a contemplative life of modest interests (is this what we call philosophy?), while following, out of responsibility, his creature.

This fable suggests to me a sort of "royal road" to sublimation, whereby the invention, creature, puppet (artwork?) is invested with the destructive, enjoying, all-too-alive impulses within the subject, so that they may play out, harming nobody; so that they may be observed from a distance; so that their vicissitudes may be subject to contemplation.

As if the alternative would be fatal.

*****

I like to encounter what I call "moments of unwatchability" in films. There's one in Phil Hoffman's film *passing through/torn formations*, with the video image of Phil's mum translating the voices of the Polish relatives as they tell the story of Uncle Janek's murder by his son. An example from the (relatively) dominant cinema would be the highway reststop encounter between Vincent Gallo and Cheryl Tiegs in Gallo's *The Brown Bunny* (not to mention the infamous blowjob sequence from the same film). Myriad others could be adduced. These are moments which arouse acute discomfort in the viewer (or maybe it's just me), decentering, mortifying him, overwhelming in some sense his capacity to grasp them aesthetically (or any other

way). If you could smell them, they'd be so malodorous as to stink a rat off a gutwagon, as my friend Jim would have it.

I find these moments compelling, can't turn away. They're like men without faces.

Here it's the sobbing scene. Right at the beginning of the film, shot from a weirdly high angle (who is there? who is shooting? how could anybody shoot this?), the sobbing Franck is clearly not the bedside Franck we've just seen; he's much older, and in retrospect it would seem that this scene was made after his return from the desert. Is this a performance, or a genuine moment? If the latter, why is the grief so persistent? Is it the same grief? Did Franck set up the shot, or is there in fact somebody else present? Why show this? Does it, or is it meant to, underwrite the loss that Franck articulates in various ways throughout the film? And so on.

The answers to these questions are unknown, and for me irrelevant. The violence of the grief, the heaving naked belly and chest, the erotic volume: I am pierced by the sobbing scene, tasked and heaped by it, find it repulsive and over-the-top, precisely unwatchable.

And thus utterly fascinating.

*****

A man crosses a desert. He crosses a desert and then returns, and makes a film about a man crossing a desert. And then he returns to the desert, and then he doesn't return.

*Hors texte*: I've tried to be scrupulous in taking the film on its own terms, but I'm not immune to what's available to be gleaned from the internet. So I beg this one indulgence: it seems that after being found murdered in Mali, the filmmaker's remains were not returned home to Ottawa, but instead were "cryogenically preserved at the Michigan Cryonics Institute in suburban Detroit's Clinton Township."

I don't know if this is true. But it is the stain on the garment, the remnant, the irreducible remainder that exceeds any possible closure of account.

And then he returns to the desert, and then he doesn't return.

And then he returns.

*****

With Melville, Franck seems to be saying: “I’ve made up my mind to be annihilated.”

*****

If a mortal force of life can still assemble and steer itself, it is because it makes contact with a ground, a density of being closed in itself, the supporting element of the terrestrial. Precarious, fortuitous, the grain of substances takes form under the hand, the opaque still sustains the palpitation of the gaze.

Beneath the general and abstract outlines of the recurrent things, a mortal clairvoyance discerns the unrecurrent, the ephemeral, the fleeting; it discerns a field of chances, understands real beings, which are in the singular. The singular death imminent about me takes form in the singular constellation of possibilities, instrumentalities, chances and snares which forms the singular landscape of the sensible world arrayed for me.

*****

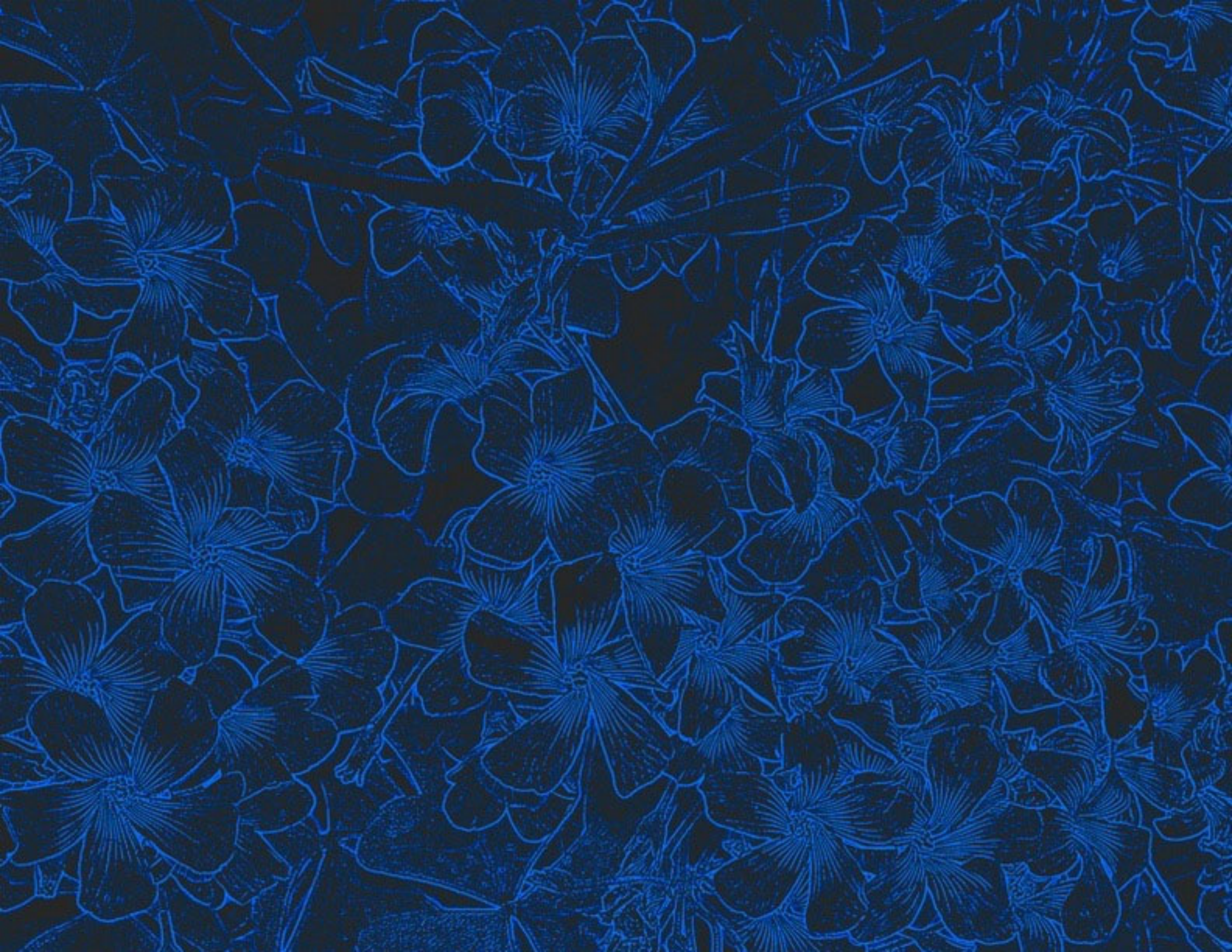
So, are you saying that art has to be philosophical?

No, I’m saying it should strive to protect us from, or at least alert us to, (our own) aggression and affliction, bear itself responsibly in the world, maintain a certain distance, and provide instances of great and edifying entertainment, in the full sense of that word.

If we learn from it how to die, so much the better.

*****

There came a day when the old knight Don Quixote, while reminding himself of the distance he had gone, no longer needed reminding of the distance he had yet to go; he succumbed to a fever which had kept him in bed for six days, during which time Sancho Panza, his good squire, never left his side.



Experience Torn to Shreds

Experiments from the Granary

*…two world wars, totalitarianisms of the right and left, massacres, genocides, and the Holocaust—have already signified (if one can still speak meaningfully) an experience torn to shreds, one impossible to put back together. It also points out the failure of the "I think"… doing its utmost, to reassemble the fantastic images of the real into a world. A defeat experienced not so much as a contradiction or failure of philosophical audacity, but already, as a cosmic catastrophe, like that mentioned in Psalm 82.5: "All foundations of the earth are shaken.* Emmanuel Levinas

**dream delivers us to dream**

As in a dream, I remember one warm summer night in Chicago, a few years ago. It was near duck, Vincent Grenier and I sat on his porch drinking a beer and chatting. And through the gaps between the buildings in front of us could be seen heard felt a large urban intersection, the confluence of several busy streets, the frequent blare of car horns and vocal chords, the palpable swelter of city heat. (I give these details in hopes of delivering to the reader an oneiric picture.) Slung crazily on the façade of a bank, an electronic sign blipped its version of time and temperature, each serenely inaccurate. The sign then, and its memory now, put me in mid of Lacan's account of a similar scene in 1966, his description of Baltimore in the early morning as "the best image to sum up the unconscious." During our conversation, Vincent told me of his admiration for Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, and the importance it holds for his own work.

**that cryptic might**

Testament of fracture, fractured testimony; fragments of witnessing and the bearing of witness. I invoke this picture that it might lie, encrypted, in the back of the reading I take here, and that it might come to animate (privately, secretly) that difficult circulation between viewers and films that we can call a cinematic reading (vision, but also scrutiny; hearing, but also listening: to witness.) A reading which, in Blanchot's words, "is anguish, and this is because any text, however important, or amusing, or interesting it may be (and the more engaging it seems to be), is empty—at bottom it doesn't exist; you have to cross an abyss, and if you do not jump, you do not comprehend." And with anguish, a certain grief.

**I grieve that grief can teach me nothing**

But it is the process that is crucial. Precisely the experience, it we understand this word etymologically as trial or test, a perilous crossing. Grenier's films experiment with the experience of others, their difficult acts of memory or let us say, remembering; gathering together the errant fragments of something that was, that will not be again, and rearticulating them (that is, in speech) as members of something else, something that is. Or better, that will be.

**the capital exception**

I will say that the singularity of Grenier's approach lies first in its refusal to accord any transparency to the presentations of the speakers, or to the cinematic (re)presentations of their speech. For the making of these films is also a rearticulation, a speaking of experience; and the same sorts of obscurely potent and embedded particularities that make, for each one of us, the peculiar drift of our speaking peculiarity our own, constrain the maker too, and so the work. The second mark of exception would be that these complications pertain to the experience of the viewer as well.

**I do not make it; I arrive there**

So that the notion of the maker as intentional, deliberate, mastering comes to be tempered (at the very least) by the perils (accidental, spontaneous, unmasterable) of his own experience. (I think of Lacan's account of his theoretical procedure in Seminar XI: "I do not seek, I find.") What's available is gathered up, put to the test, subjected to experiment by one who is himself in process, on trial. (Perhaps he could say, with Melville's Ishmael: "I am the architect, not the builder.") And the work takes shape, and shape again in the shaping of each viewer who risks a leap.

**In this our talking America**

They are talking, everywhere and always, about loss. In *I.D.* Joanne has lost her job (perhaps her dignity); Milton's parents have lost their

home and possessions, and he his breath; Steve recounts Harpo's death (and where is his brother Sean?); Gayle talks about the Prisoner who has lost his name. Lisa's story in *You* is of a failed love affair, and Dan in *Out in the Garden* has lost his future. What is remarkable is the powerful passivity with which they speak in the face of loss, the passion not only of what they say, but of how they say it, how they behave as they speak. They all perform a labor, let's say a work of mourning. The losses of which they speak amount finally to loss of self, and this labor of speaking, this coming to terms with loss becomes an effort to find oneself again, to remember oneself.

**where do we find ourselves?**

Precisely at a loss, and everywhere and always. Every recovery from loss is a gathering, through speech, of those scattered remnants which happen to hand, and which we sort through (as if to separate kernel from husk) and piece together as experience in which we find ourselves again, and anew. But every new experience of self risks new perils, and the price of recovery of self is the inevitable need to recover it again. The question "who am I?" can (must) only be answered again and again, and only partially, in fragments. Every finding of an answer entails its failure, and the question must be broached anew in a speaking (we could say, dialectic) that is not terminable.

**All our blows glance, all our hits are accidents**

I come back to Grenier's approach. Blows (I mean the way the maker approaches) glance because they are observations, they bear witness. Hits (I mean the character of the observations, the cinematic articulation) are accidents because they are not essences. He finds what comes to hand, picks it up, uses it in his own (peculiar, particular) way. Take the amazing segment from *Out in the Garden* in which Dan's face as he talks is reflected in (in a way, superimposed upon) a framed photograph that seems to be several decades old. The man depicted could be Dan's father or grandfather, but he's young in the photograph, younger than Dan, wears a collar and tie and a confident, maybe even smug, expression. Dan is speaking about being HIV positive, about how concerned people are, about the pity he reads in straight people's faces, how they seem to confer a death warrant upon him, how he wishes they weren't so concerned. His face (its reflection) is distorted by the imperfections of the glass in the photo frame. Sometimes the two faces seem to merge into a composite, sometimes one or the other grasps our attention. A stunning range of oppositions is set up: youth/middle-age; confidence as to the future/hopelessness in the lack of a future; a movement, in the past, toward the future (to be experienced)/a movement, in the present (now past) toward the past in search of experience (to be remembered, to be missed): paternity, engenderment, generation/filiation, non-engenderment, end of generation; straight/gay; clarity/distortion. (I am not being exhaustive.) All of this can be found in the found image/segment, but it founds no essential or immanent meaning. It can be given (it gives itself) only and precisely to be read, and meaning can be conferred upon it only retroactively (and only inconclusively).

**everything looks real and angular**

This process (trial, test, experiment) of approach by indirection, as if taking an (accidental, not deliberate) angle on things, is relentless in these films. Dan almost never speaks on camera directly; Instead we see him hear him through a window which reflects the bare branches of a tree, as a shadow on a patio, in a mirror, and so on. In *I.D.*, Gayle speaks off-camera in the Prologue, Nadra is caught in extreme close-up (her hands, the back of her head), Steve is reflected in a mirror (or his reflection is blacked by his interlocutor). Milton talking about his parents is superimposed on Milton talking about his asthma attack, the two soundtracks competing for dominance. All of this angularity, this indirection requires that some direction through (let's say, across) the film has to be found by the viewer in his or her own way, should that way be risked.

**Like a bird which alights from nowhere**

So many oddities of Grenier's mode of cinematic articulation (call it a language, a way of speaking: I continue to insist) simply invite us to be struck (not a glancing blow, a hit!); I mean impressed, moved. In

*You*, what seems to be a double image of Lisa swims and glitters on the surface of some ocean, as she tells the story of the Porsche driver with the baseball bat. Suddenly, as if from nowhere, a stick emerges from the bottom of the image, and then two feet. The stick stirs the water and we have to rethink (re-experience?) what we've just seen (and what we've just heard?), and work out (is it possible?) what we've witnessed. Find something, lose it, refind (passively, passionately) something new again.

**we thrive by casualties**

Pushing this a bit further, this stunning double reflection of Lisa I mean, we can see (from this distance, retroactively, that is) how casually apt it is. There are two reflections, and there are two Lisas: she speaks (she remembers) and she writes (we know not what): there is Lisa now (she is speaking) and Lisa then (she is spoken). The displacement at work here is extensive: Lisa now (speaking) is Lisa then (being filmed) but also Lisa as she will always be (on film); but Lisa on film will never be apprehended fully the same way twice by any viewer. (The potential for vertigo is immense in trying to think this through.) Also doubled is the "you" to whom Lisa speaks, who is presumably her real ex-lover, but whose position, because of the pronoun, the viewer can't avoid taking up to some extent. And with that identification comes the threatening aggressivity in Lisa's address.

**these beautiful limits**

At the beginning of *You*, Lisa talks about her fear of going to the movies with "you" because of the danger of one of "your" excessive responses to people talking during the film. We see her partially hidden behind a large shaft that's part of some sort of machinery, the cogs and wheels of which, and the flickering light in which it's bathed, are suggestive of a movie projector. You (I mean you the viewer) are in fact at the movies, watching this film. Maybe somebody's talking rudely nearby. Maybe you'd like to take a swipe at him. There are plenty of invitations in the film (and in the others) for identification, but also plenty of operations (non-synchronous sound, rapid cutting, bizarre images, aggressivity) which undermine it. What is crucial in these films that stress the absolute particularity (I'd even say the potential unintelligibility) of a person's experience (and his or her means of speaking it) is their profound openness to the relation of interchange between viewer and film, identification will frequently be gratified but just as frequently blocked; the viewer can suffer (as a passion, I'll say) this blockage, will experience it as a loss, and can be changed by it; and the viewer can then return to the film to find a different articulation of the blockage or passage of identification in a process (trial, experiment, experience) potentially interminable. A dialectic, that is, which, in its itinerant circulation around the question of identity, exerts upon it (for viewer and maker both, I'd say) a destabilizing force.

**we have not arrived at a wall, but an interminable oceans**

Or, we must say with Blanchot, at "that marine infinitude which both buoys and engulfs." We are lost, we capsize, we meet the limit which would sublimely overwhelm us, but find ourselves anew again, recovered on board the devious-cruising bark of experience newly remembered: passage for another risky crossing.

**I know better than to claim any completeness for my picture**

In these remarks I've privileged Grenier's most recent films, his "talking pictures." While I'd be unwilling to propose any developmental saga, I can (sketchily) suggest some features of the early work that are pertinent to the late. The delicate luminous illusions tested in *While Revolved* and *Closer Outside* resurface in *I.D.* and *You*, reflecting the illusory identities at stake there. *Interieur Interiours* sets up a kind of feminine topology (of the fold, say: a kind of chiastic crossover of inside with outside), a spatial erotics resonant with Lisa's doubled (maybe inverted) image in *You*, and with the use of superimposition in *I.D. World in Focus* opposes mapping, the finding of direction, to indirection (focal articulation), and suggests, through its investigation of the book, that finding oneself, one's place, has something to do with reading. More generally, the early films exhibit (uncannily) the uncanny domesticity so crucial to the later work.

**ghostlike we glide**

*D'Apres Meg* foregrounds the uniqueness of human gestures as a pre-verbal mode of expression (call it a speaking). And I will say that *Time's Wake (Once Removed)* marks the transition to the "talkies" in its shifting from the domestic to the familiar (the family, but also the sense of ghostly companion: it is that sort of wake too). Composed of fragments of what seem to be "home movies", and using many of the formal elements of the work that succeeds it, *Time's Wake*, despite its silence, establishes a (ghostly) discourse inexorable and mournful in its drift as the icepack in the St. Laurence.

**I am a fragment, and this is a fragment of me**

I cannot apologize for the personal, peculiar (not to say perverse) character of my remarks. My account has been of the work of my friend, my Vincent Grenier, as I experience, as I think and speak it and him. If has no authority but my meager own. If I have (perhaps unfashionably nowadays) made him Emersonian, it is because I read him as sharing the complex and ethical approach of Emerson's "Experience" to "this new yet unapproachable America." This approach, this experience (experiment), is mournful and recuperative and renewing; it is torn, in fragments; it shakes the foundations of the earth. (I could have spoken of its mystical character, risking everything.) It is nothing without its peril. Somebody's always liable to come after you with a baseball bat.

**we live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them**

If Vincent has a Hitchcockian cameo in his films, it can only be the masked and crazylimbed skater in *D'Après Meg*.

**we dress our garden**

So many gardeners in these films: Meg, Milton, Dan; even Lisa tends a watery garden. A familiar (uncanny?) metaphor: Eden, America. A garden could also be a cemetery, or that wild growth that overruns the site where a concentration camp used to stand. We dig and dress, we prune and tend and cultivate; or we simply stand and mark the place, observing the grasses and wildflowers and the few remaining broken scorched bricks. Tending, attendance; a labor, a duty. And sometimes we can, as Vincent Grenier can, stoop down and separate the corn from the dross, gather it up and store it in the granary. Our sustenance over a hard winter. Our seed for spring.

"Simulacra: The End of the World" (tr. David Allison) in David Wood (ed.) Writing the Future London: Routledge, 1990 p. 12.

"Of Structure as an inmixing of Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatever" in Donato and Mackey (eds.) The Structuralist Controversy Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970 p.189.

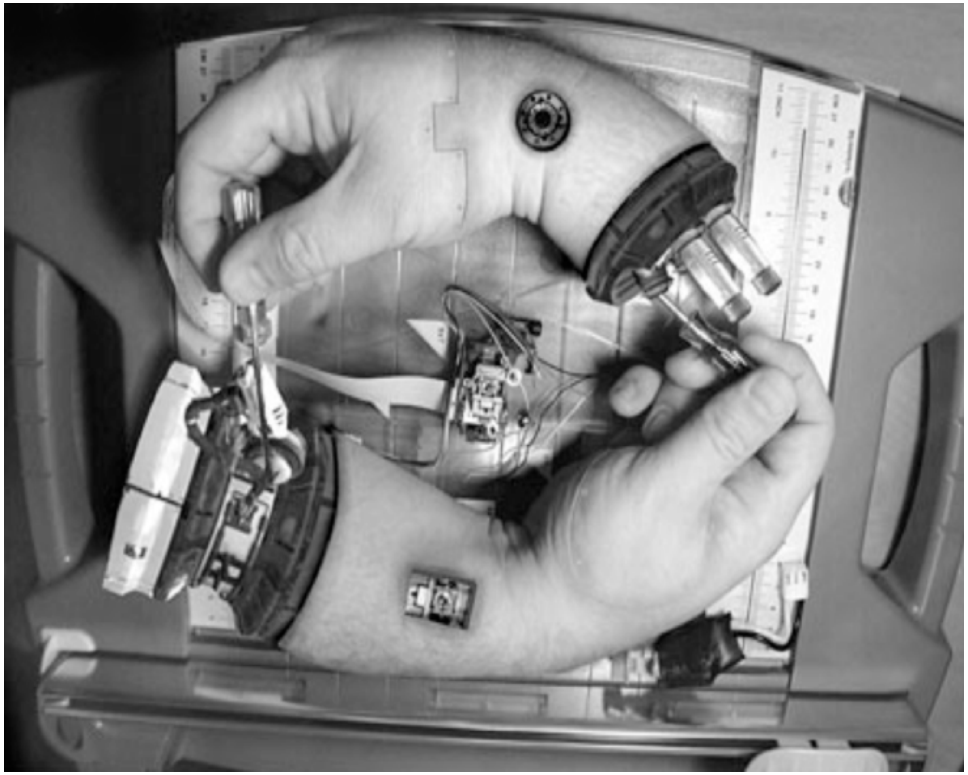
The Writing of the Disaster (tr. Ann Smack) Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986 p10.

The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis (ed. J-A Miller)(tr. Alan Sheridan) New York: W W Norton & Co., 1977 p. 7

The Writing of the Disaster p. 112.

The boldface headings of each of these paragraphs are extracted from Emerson's essay.

la fin du voyage.



Notes While Waiting: an Interview

In 1957, the United States fired the first missile founded on the explosive power of hydrogen. This inaugural launch of the H-bomb proved to have an unexpected fallout. A cadre of state scientists nicknamed the missile “Mike,” and for the next three decades “Mike” would become the most popular first name for North American males. The folklores of naming hold a special fascination for filmmaker Mike Cartmell, whose adopted beginnings have lent a fictional air to his autobiography. In 1984, Cartmell began *Narratives of Egypt*, a four-part series that deals with the father in *Prologue*, the son in *In the Form of the Letter “X”*, the lover in *Cartouche*, and the mother in *Farrago*. Using a speculative etymology, Cartmell “adopts” the American writer Herman Melville as his father, using selected passages to ruminate on death, language and paternity. *Narratives of Egypt*, like *Ça Tombe*, *It’s Coming*, *Secretions*, and a host of others are still unfinished. They may never be finished. Speaking of his own work, Cartmell remarked, “I don’t build grand buildings, I make the architect’s equivalent of beer stores. Somebody builds these buildings — but who? And who cares?” As we spoke it became clear that the gestures of Cartmell, while resolutely filmic, are not inscribed in emulsion, but in the place of theory, in a waiting game he is playing with the fin de siècle.

**MH**: How did you become interested in film?

**MC**: After high school, I went to Europe and stayed mostly in Paris, where I went to the Cinémathèque every day. They showed five films a day, and the program changed daily. When I came back from Paris, I studied philosophy at the University of Toronto. In the mid-seventies, after finishing our bachelor of arts, Maureen and I went to Buffalo and entered a cultural studies program. A couple of years went by and our marriage ended, so I had to leave because we couldn’t live there separately. And I went insane, so I couldn’t do any work anyway. I don’t know what this has to do with film. In 1973, I got a super-8 camera and shot with much less inhibition than I do now. I had no way of seeing my film; I didn’t have a projector or viewer so I just kept shooting. Later I borrowed some money and bought a Bolex for next to nothing. I certainly wasn’t thinking of myself as a filmmaker, but I thought, well, I can just make still images; I can shoot 4,000 images every roll. But I couldn’t afford to put any film in it. In 1979 I came back to Hamilton from Buffalo and began working at a steel plant, and suddenly I was making piles of money. So I could shoot again. But it never occurred to me to make a film.

**MH**: What were you shooting?

**MC**: Self portraits. I think it was because I was crazy, or I’d been crazy. I’d spent a little while in the nutball factory on my own initiative, and as soon as I got there I realized, oh my gawd, why am I here? So I got myself out. I stayed seven days. I read about six Henry James novels in a week, so you can imagine how bad it was. I remember Michelle McLean showing a one-reel 8mm film of a bunch of stuff on a picnic table with the wind blowing. She said, “I really like the way the light is in that.” I thought: How can you take this seriously? How could you have an entire industry devoted to this, to continually talk ,about the way “the light” is? There seemed to be an awful lot of posing in that direction. To be honest, I think there still is. Cinema could be an art form that talks about itself, but I think it’s almost exhausted that moment. I wondered what else you could use the cinema for. Can you do philosophy in writing any more? Who would read it? Nobody reads any more. I don’t mean read literally, I mean read powerfully. I think we’re going through a transformation in dominant communicative paradigms. There are people coming along with powerful viewing skills that animate their thought processes, and it’s got to do with television and movies even though they’re filled mostly with crap.

**MH**: But people only understand film to the extent that it mimics literature — look at Hollywood. Marshall McLuhan said that each new medium would pick at the corpse of the one which preceded it for its content. So cinema took shape as a book.

**MC**: I’m suggesting that one day there won’t be any more literature and that if you want to do philosophy, you have to turn to film. Like in Greece, the oral tradition was supplanted by writing. It didn’t happen

in a day. So Plato writes in the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter* that writing is poison to thought; it's a terrible way to do philosophy. Too bad we can't talk. But there aren't enough people to remember it and say it after I'm gone. But at one time there were. How did the *Odyssey* get passed on? People remembered it and were able to recite it. But our literacy changed the way we remember. Eventually we'll run out of people who can read something as complex as *Ulysses* or the Bible.

**MH**: What does that mean — philosophy?

**MC**: I'm using the term in the ancient sense where it embraces logic and nature and spirit. It has to do with everything. Not just an esoteric body of thought harboured in a tiny wing of the university, but philosophy as knowing activity, all activity engaged in inventing and exchanging and developing knowledge.

**MH**: You said once that all art is either paranoid or schizophrenic.

**MC**: So what does paranoia mean? In what sense would you say that Joyce or Shakespeare were paranoiac? I would say in the sense that everything has meaning. I'm taking Stephen Dedalus' view of Shakespeare, that "a great artist doesn't make mistakes." That's not my view of a great artist; it's his. Here's a guy who would spend two weeks writing one sentence just getting the wording the way he wanted it. Paranoia is the interpretative desire gone wild, and any form of interpretation is paranoid in principle. In any effort to close, to complete the effort of interpretation, paranoia exists. The problem is that there isn't any closure to the operation. The alternative would be not to care, to engage in interpretation for *jouissance*. That's the Barthean or Derridean position — that one's life, one's being, isn't at stake in the interpretative act; that it's a gesture made among others. That's why you can introduce chance procedures. Look up all the words in the dictionary that start with the phoneme "phil" and use that to interpret Phil Hoffman's films, for instance. But you'd only do that because it's not crucial to know everything. You produce one reading. Paranoia wants control over everything so nothing can harm it [the paranoid subject]. I don't want to control everything; I want someone else to guide me through it. I'm infantile in that respect.

We live, you could say, in an age in which the dominant technologies of communication are undergoing a radical transformation. The capacity to access knowledge, information and culture through written works has declined in favour of more passive and more audio-visually oriented modes. What are the possibilities opened by these new and popular electronic media? What sort of "writing" would be appropriate for an audio-visual culture? How would the transmission of ideas, information, emotions, aesthetic experiences, take place in this milieu? Is "transmission" the ‚proper metaphor here: would "exchange," or "engagement," or "articulation" be more apt? What would be the most useful structural motifs for the production and circulation of "texts" within such a paradigm? These are just a few questions that have only begun to be addressed. In some of his later books (for example, *Dissemination*, *Glas*, *Truth in Painting*, and *The Post Card*), Derrida elaborates a theory of "writing" proper to the practices of a number of postmodernist artistic (both literary and plastic) texts — a theory which finds inscribed in those texts manifold extensions of the author's proper name, and obscure details of his or her life. These inscriptions or "signatures" become the clues both to the decipherment of the works (in the sense that phonetic rendering of foreign names on funerary monuments [cartouches] were crucial to Champollion's eventual decipherment of hieroglyphic writing), and to the extensions of meaning beyond the texts and authors themselves. The central operating principle here is a kind of semiotic, homophonic, etymological, and metamnemonic play, in which the proper name and its variants are subject to a massive dispersal across and beyond the textual field, opening pathways for the interminable (on the part of the reader/viewer) production of meaning and interpretation in opposition to any notion of consumption or closure. Whew! Texts, in this view, are precisely games, ones that are subject only to laws and rules of overflow, of slippage, of over-determination and excess. I believe that the unconscious articulates itself in one's work. And it does so unconsciously — a fact overlooked by many.

Take someone like Phil Hoffman. To me, it would be stupid to look at Phil's films and regard the instances of landscape as symptomatic, as pointing to some kind of unconscious relation, that it has to do with the maternal earth body, or something like that. The things that are symptomatic in his film would be the things that Phil doesn't think are there, that people wouldn't notice in the film without moving through the work with a particular kind of address, the gaps in the film, the things that don't systematically crop up because the unconscious is not systematic. So, if there's a systematic address of the landscape, that's not where the real nub lies. I think you have to look at the partial and the fragmentary in any work to find out what the work is articulating on the level of the unconscious. I think that stuff is well hidden in any systematic discourse about work or criticism, especially when it's only achieved the level it has with Canadian avant-garde film, which is very programmatic and preliminary. There's not a great discourse about avant-garde film, but what there is, is clearly defined and dogmatic. So any work that doesn't conform to the rubric is not work. It doesn't count; it isn't art.

**MH**: Do you think that matters?

**MC**: It's certainly had effects. Not the least of which is the availability of funds for people to continue to make work. That's the most damaging effect. Many makers haven't got money to make films because it's harder to see their work as part of that "tradition." And yet it seems to me the concept of tradition, the concept of canon, if they have any meaning, have nothing to do with notions of "experimental" or "independent" or "avant-garde."

**MH**: But avant-garde film is most often screened in the classroom where a very strong canon and tradition exists. Patricia Gruben's work goes to universities as an example of Canadian feminist new narrative; David Rimmer's films serve as an introduction to structuralism; Joyce Wieland is the avant-garde patriot...

**MC**: But what if the point of the course was not to articulate a tradition, a history, and a canon, but to engage a number of issues with respect to audiovisual art? Today's university program hasn't budged since Hegel invented it; it transmits knowledge from the supposed master to the supposed disciple by presenting a canon of object material which is reviewed with students, who then rehearse that review in exactly the same form — the essay. You're going to run into the problem that things are changing. People's capacity to think and learn has changed, and I'm not saying degraded. We're not literary anymore; we're something else. The fact that we face in universities a generation of students who aren't literary is a particularly great opportunity for a culture that isn't based in letters, and film culture is exactly that. Or it has the potential to be exactly that. Where it's most that is in the avant-garde. The instances where that potential is most developed is by the inventors of cinema. Most of these are in the avant-garde.

**MH**: What do you mean by inventors?

**MC**: People who aren't imitating literature or theatre in cinema. Like Eisenstein or Godard. We're dealing now with students whose cognitive apparatus isn't formed by reading but by watching and hearing stuff. And we have to do something about this. We're going to miss the brilliant people — because the standards by which we evaluate these students don't have any application anymore. I think students shouldn't have to buy books but should be made to buy a video camera. And if you take a philosophy class you should be making a philosophy video. Obviously, the institutional inertia against that change is massive, but it's a historical shift which will take a long time.

**MH**: What's the effect on makers?

**MC**: To isolate them from the institution. It's far more possible for someone like my son to be able to take a video camera at the age of twenty and do something useful, powerful, and moving than do what I'm about to do again. Go to university to study and write, in the academically sanctioned fashion. If you look within the universities, the people who are doing the most interesting work are violating all

of these sanctions. They're not writing books anymore. They're writing, but writing has become something else, not transmission of knowledge, but dissemination of writing. So meaning is no longer something that proceeds through a text in a linear fashion to its conclusion. Meaning is something that explodes from a text, in fragments, in pieces. So if I'm the subject reading these texts, I may be interested in taking something here and taking something there. In other words, knowledge becomes something constructed, rather than something that's available to be transmitted. And isn't that a lot like...

**MH**: Art.

**MC**: But even art has been conceived in these terms. This is one of the problems of the avant-garde. There's an avant-garde that erupts at a certain time that's radical and distinct, but eventually it's recuperated and becomes part of a canon and a tradition. So now we can look back and study Dada. Here's what I always talk about in film production courses. There are basically three steps to making a film: *découpage*, collage, and montage. *Découpage* busts everything into bits, then you start to articulate the relation between one bit and a context other than its original because the original context has been lost. Yet there's a trace of it left in the bit. That's the collage process. And montage is putting it back together in a form which either has continuity or it doesn't. So it's a constructive process; it's producing something. But the relation is not the phenomenological relation of mediation which comes out of a romantic tradition, which says, oh yes, the photograph is the way I mediate the world to myself. It's not that at all. Your relation to the world isn't one of mediation — it's one which breaks the world apart. Gregory Ulmer is dealing with this. He argues that film techniques should be used to present material in the classroom and receive the work of students. It'll be ages before that occurs. But maybe not. Look at the kind of changes that have occurred over the past fifteen years. It's unbelievable. If we don't blow ourselves up, there may be an equal pace of change. I'm talking about everyone's daily life changes; I don't mean the space race. Daily life is about microcomputers of enormous power and everybody's got 'em. They change the way you think. Computers aren't literary either. With a computer you can marshal information in ways you could only do with one skill and a dogged determination in the past; namely, going to the library and looking them up and reading them. You can access the Betman Archive on two disks — literally millions of historical photographs. Just think of your desktop publishing program: the way you can articulate text and image on a page, the shape of a page. You can be Mallarmé, but with vaster potential because you can access stuff faster.

**MH**: What kind of implications has this had for filmmakers?

**MC**: It's what I'm thinking about now. One effect is to make me much less productive at the moment. I'm thinking about it. I wish to inscribe some kind of major break, and it's causing me all kinds of problems personally. In terms of this condition in education, it hasn't had any kinds of effects because no one's explored it to any great degree.

**MH**: What about how our changing technologies are engineering a shift in how we live?

**MC**: Video has brought about profound structural changes in the way we think, in the way we act toward one another. The VCR is the technology that marks the eighties more than anything else. It's done two things. It allows for archival retrieval of material. But the main difference is that you can tape everything, and only watch on tape, which Paul Virillio suggests is the only way to watch TV. So instead of watching the news at six, you watch the news at seven, after you've taped it, and then you can analyze it. That's a big move. Think of the power you gain over the news broadcasts and the ways in which events are represented. If you can stop the tape and look again.

**MH**: It takes you out of that flow which finally operates to erase memory and history. Without the opportunity to position yourself, there's only the present.

**MC**: Precisely. TV erases history. It's why advertising works. If you could look at commercials carefully, they wouldn't work. They work because you can't watch them; they just happen to you. It's like getting ,a virus. They repeat things in a way so you don't notice, so eventually you're conditioned to accept certain propositions that are ridiculous. You know the expression "knowledge is power"? The question is: For whom? The knower? Or the entity that put the knowledge into you? Everybody knows the saying: "Winston tastes good like a cigarette should." It doesn't matter whether you buy it or not because you already know it. And you're right — it has to do with being in that flow. But as soon as you tape everything, you are in charge of the information. You can see how it works. Now what you do with that is another issue. You can make a videotape and be a video artist in Canada, where you decry the use of television ads and their techniques. Or you can use those same techniques to make a commercial about something more worthwhile than shampoo.

**MH**: But why has that project been taken up so often by video folk and so seldom by filmmakers? Watching avant-garde film you wouldn't even know media existed in this country.

**MC**: Video technology has intrinsic retrieval and copying abilities.

**MH**: But people have shot off screens, used optical printers...

**MC**: It's easier in video. It's exactly the same as the difference between scratch music with turntables and digital sampling. Film is scratch music with turntables — there are certain things you can do which are the same as digital, but they're just so labour-intensive. And film has another history. Some filmmakers seem reasonably interested in articulating issues in that history — the history of ethnographic cinema, for example. So they're not interested in media as a general topic, but cinematic media. I was born in a TV era, but I'm a literary person, which is a disadvantage as a filmmaker. Many filmmakers don't feel like this because all they're doing is making literature — in their case, audio-visual literature — and my work is too. That to me is its weakness. In other words, it's not inventing cinema. Now maybe I'm not capable of inventing cinema. I'm obviously vastly less capable than plenty of people. But the gap I notice between myself and some of my students is that I can come up with all kinds of ideas for films, conceptualize what I want to do. They have a great deal of difficulty doing that. Why? Because the way I conceptualize is literary. Right now the only easy way to conceptualize is using literary methods. There may be other ways. In fact, this whole position implies that conceptualization ought to have another form. But one of the things students are good at is taking an idea and then going on to put stuff together. If you can do the *découpage*, busting up the world, and hand them a bunch of fragments, they can put it together with more grace and ease than I ever could. And that suggests something about the way their minds work. They've been advantaged by not reading.

**MH**: If most avant-garde filmmakers aren't inventing cinema, what are they doing?

**MC**: I don't know. I don't think that most people aren't inventing cinema because they can't, but because it doesn't occur to them. I think there are lots of people making work in the tradition of avant-garde film. There are others whose practice is enervated by something they've read in a book; they've embarked in film because of an encounter with theoretical issues they've gathered in some non-filmic way. And that doesn't necessarily mean that work will be bad, though it has great potential to be bad. Influence is a very difficult question. But finally I have to agree with someone like Harold Bloom who feels that, at some point, influence has to be resisted. All art begins with imitation. We all have some reason to start to work in a certain way. Nobody is going to make a film never having seen one. Let's suppose you're a woman and you're interested in feminism generally and feminine *écriture* in particular. There's all sorts of material you'll likely read, there's conferences you'll go to, there's magazines you might look at, and then you go and make a film or video. All that stuff is going to have an influence. It's going to give you certain aspects of a recipe. The extent to which you follow that recipe will get you in trouble, I think, although you may be

successful. It may get some attention. Reviews. Notices. Even for work that isn't very good. And that may allow the maker to make an advance. And these advances may get strung together, and suddenly there's a career at stake. If you want to look at things from the point of view of art, then this kind of procedure can't be good. Yeah, it can be okay as a start. But at a certain point, someone has to invent rather than just copy. You've been making pound cake. Then you start to make another kind of cake. But pretty soon you're going to have to make *coq au vin*. And you won't have a recipe to do it. You have to invent.

**MH**: What do you mean when you say it doesn't occur to people to invent?

**MC**: Well, what are the rewards? What are the sorts of parameters that come into play in terms of whether or not a work is successful, is well received? I don't know that radical difference is one of them. Not radical. I think that particularly in this town — obviously it's imagined because I seldom go out anymore — but I don't think it's unfair to say that in Toronto there's notions about what is correct practice. Like the depiction of sexuality. It's bad if this sexuality is heterosexual and male. Lots of men make art that has something to do with feminism. Some of the work I've seen seems quite forced; it seems to lack something. I'm not saying that good old heterosexuality is the only way, because much of what feminists complain about in terms of how sexuality is articulated in our culture is exactly right. It's like Adam and Eve. She's there for your companionship. For you. Even if we can reject that, and I hope most of us can, there's still a residue in our culture that's impossible to avoid. Even women participate in it.

**MH**: What about the argument that avant-garde film is now, and has traditionally been, a white, male, and middle-class preserve. That it's racist and sexist by exclusion.

**MC**: First of all, I think it's true that it has been that. And to the extent that it remains that, it deserves to be attacked. I wouldn't be comfortable in a community which could be legitimately conceived as male and white. But at the same time, I don't think being black and female, or Native and homosexual, automatically warrants greater authenticity. It's the problem of affirmative action. If only white men can control the field of avant-garde film, then it's no good. They'll simply reproduce themselves. This also explains why video is much more issue oriented, or why work by people who aren't white and male tends to be more issue oriented. Because they have an issue. They have a legitimate issue. In the best of all possible worlds there might be white men and black lesbians doing work about the same kinds of things, and you could look at the work together — at the work, not the makers. But because of the position that people are placed in now, it's not possible for someone not to have their personal history, sexuality, and race attached to their making. These aspects thoroughly invest people's work — it's as true of white men as everyone else. It's just that white men have tended to be the standard, the norm, which is a problem. It's a problem of authorship, believing that work is the vision of its maker. This is another thing which I think is changing. It's just impossible for me, at an intellectual level, to conceive of authors having anything to do with work.

**MH**: But you suggested earlier that one should read the work as an unconscious expression of its maker.

**MC**: Not the unconscious of its maker but the unconscious of the work. I think our culture has an unconscious. Inasmuch as anything produced now shares in its culture, it shares in the unconscious of its culture. So the fact that Phil Hoffman's work is Phil's doesn't matter — knowing him might be a disadvantage only because it might lead you to say, well, Phil wouldn't think that. For example, one of the things that interests me in *passing through* is that there's lots of ways in which it articulates what Hegel or Levinas would describe as a Jewish sensibility. But Phil's not Jewish. I don't think he's even knowledgeable about Judaism. But for me, it's legible in his work. We participate in a range of symbolic structures and elements and materials — the Jewish sensibility, the Hellenic sensibility — and the themes elicited by those sensibilities are often what we stupidly term

“the great themes of art.” So statements about the unconscious of a work don’t have anything to do with their maker.

**MH**: But in an environment in which makers are asking for grants, where reputations and bodies of work are at stake, in distribution catalogues where works are listed beneath the names of the author, how is this non-author position tenable?

**MC**: Yeah, we still sign. Someone like Derrida, who has done a lot to disrupt traditional notions of the academy and writing, still signs his work. And his books, which aren’t books, are in books! Here’s a prediction: if he doesn’t die, Derrida will make a video, an audio-visual text which will be a philosophical text. He’ll actually be inventing philosophy, not repeating it. He’s done this in a performative way by giving lectures in two voices. All these are jokes, which is one of the things I like about Derrida. He’s got a good sense of humour. When you look back historically on occasions where there have been quite radical ruptures in tradition, it’s most effectively been done by people with a sense of humour, Socrates, for example, not dour old academics.

**MH**: Is there any point in making avant-garde films now — given its marginality, its inability to see beyond its own formalist history or respond to newer agendas of race, representation, and the media? Given the preponderance of white male hegemony, the absence of critical discourse, the lack of exhibition outlets?

**MC**: People who make narratives are real filmmakers, and I’m just a joker and you too; we’re just dorks. I haven’t done what I want to do. I know what I’m going to do — it’s to make things and describe them later as not what I want to do. In other words, I’m going to fail or stop entirely. There’s a future in avant-garde film if we begin to understand “the project” differently. You claim there’s an audience out there for work, but they’re uninterested in the kind of modernist shit that’s in the canon. And you’re right. But we’re not going to be supplying them with anything they’ll be interested in unless we change. The deal is, only so many people can be admitted to that canon, and there are people in our midst to make sure we won’t get admitted. One of the difficulties you might have in putting together cohesive programs that don’t have to do with the canon or the author, that violate the codes that organize material, is that a lot of people are at a stage where they don’t really know what to do. They know what they don’t want to do, but not the reverse. I can’t believe I’m the only person not doing anything.

**MH**: Many have stopped. But, for most, it’s less out of aesthetic confusion than material necessities — it’s just too expensive and too difficult.

**MC**: That’s always part of it, but at the level of a social unconscious, there are those whose current projects are consistent with their previous projects. They’re building a reputation and a career and a consistent body of work, and they’re getting grants because they’re doing that. There are other people whose next film bears no resemblance to their past work.

**MH**: That’s considered to be a great failing.

**MC**: Well, it would be, wouldn’t it? Because it’s not in keeping with the notions of authorship and continuity and tradition that we ascribe to. We may not aspire to these notions in our own practice, but we ascribe to them in the way in which we articulate our practice. If your next film is different in style and aim and goal and content, it’s likely also different in quality. You might make a film to your own mind that’s a success and another that’s a complete catastrophe. If you look historically at other times of rupture, and there haven’t been all that many, this has been pretty usual.

**MH**: What do you mean by rupture?

**MC**: A kind of catastrophe that signals a new beginning. It’s a period of more than just change. It means a radical transformation of the way in which cognition and perception take place, the way work is done, technological shifts and changes in relation to language

generally. It's absolutely certain that we're in one. If you look back, you find that there are artists of all sorts whose entire careers are occasional successes amid massive catastrophes. Most are forgotten. But even those who have survived as the great signals of transition have uneven careers, especially in their formative period — from thirty to forty, sometimes in their youth. For someone like Joyce it happened all at once, early on. But if you look at Joyce, none of his work resembles his previous work. Freud is another example. He didn't conceive psychoanalysis all at once. He did a lot of stuff that was a total disaster, like his studies on cocaine and hysteria. Even people who may not necessarily think about all the social, technological, historical, or aesthetic issues of the present moment are in tune with them in some respect. Some repress this and continue. Others can't repress it successfully, though they may not be able to articulate its eruption. They live its eruption, but eventually they may do something radically different that may turn out to be important. I don't know. It's like when the angel comes down to tell Adam about how the world was created. The first thing he says is, "I'm going to tell you the story, but I'm going to tell it to you in terms that you can understand. Using words. This will radically distort the truth." So I'm saying something about what someone like you or me might do, but I'm still talking in terms consistent with the ideology of art making, which is a romantic ideology — the artist as stalwart, intrepid visionary, and white and male for all that, who has a destiny and a vision. Even somebody who is farting around and in a state of disunity may ultimately emerge as a strong maker. It is really difficult to find a way to talk about this in terms that actually address what might be on the other side of this transformation. How long did it take for the oral tradition to be completely supplanted by the literary? Hundreds of years. In fact, there are remnants of the oral tradition that still exist.

**MH**: So how does one go about allocating funds to artists?

**MC**: I would rather have three-billion dollars for arts activities in this country than a submarine. We're getting eight submarines. Why not seven? Do they come in eights? Like hot dog buns? My position would be not to build one nuclear submarine and just throw the money on the street. It would be a special kind of money only good for film — eight-billion dollars on the road all over Canada. Anybody who finds it can use it. Can't be transferred to dollars, and it's a capital crime to sell it. Clearly the situation as it exists is bad, not just because there's not enough money, but the method of dispersing money is bad because the money goes to friends, because juries may have a particular complexion, or no complexion. But the disbursement of money isn't the problem. Meagre though it is, there remains public money available to us which isn't similarly available in the United States, for instance. I don't think money is the ,problem. I don't think the solution is don't give any money, because then only the best will survive and only the work that has to be made will appear by the people who have to make it. None of that will change the essential problem of transformation. The nature of things is in flux. So it's always going to be more possible to repeat the same successfully, rather than doing something radically different successfully — up to a point. I'll bet that there are dozens of powerful filmmakers who have never made a film. They simply wouldn't go in that direction because the field is so circumscribed by certain codes. A lot of others have stopped. It's why I stopped. It makes me uncomfortable in ways it shouldn't — even to go to screenings if I think I'll have to talk to certain people. If I have to defend something outside the paradigms being presented, I can't, so I don't want to go at all. It's possible now to make that decision. But by the end of the century, it won't be possible anymore. That person will do it anyway. Right now we've got a lot of apocalyptic thinkers in avant-garde film who feel that it's over, that there are no great filmmakers left — Camper, Elder, etc. But that's not true.

**MH**: Why are they saying it?

**MC**: Because what is happening is that more and more people are unable to continue in the tradition, and yet they're still unable to develop the new. But they will. We're also talking about a generational thing. We're part of a generation that's been slow to mature in certain respects. I think the fact that many of us lived in

terror that we'd be blown up any second has had profound effects. We had all kinds of material abundance and a nurturing environment in terms of goods that's almost unprecedented. But at the same time, there was this supplemental insecurity. I think it explains why people who are almost forty right now, like me, don't know what the fuck they're doing. They have no career, no prospects, no job. They're like kids. I feel like I'm twenty years old. There are lots of people at loose ends on the threshold of their chronological maturity who are not doing anything. But unlike other times in history, there isn't any kind of radical outlet for them. You can't go to Paris like you could in the twenties. You can't go to the States and drive across the country for a year and write a book. You can't do this kind of stuff, because it costs too much to live. I'm out of money. I can only stay here till the end of the month. I don't know what happens next.

**MH**: You've suggested that what happens "next" is the invention of cinema — the creation of an audio-visual text which is no longer content to illustrate literature, but which "makes sense" in a different way.

**MC**: Ultimately, I think invention will occur in cinema, or the next technological version of cinema. It may occur at the level of avant-garde film or at the level of pedagogy. Maybe someone like Derrida will make a videotape that will create something unseen. Maybe it'll occur in the organization of family life. Right now this has been reduced to its lowest common denominator on *America's Funniest Home Videos*. But there are people around who are recording everything, stuff you wouldn't put on TV, and sooner or later some orphan after the funeral is going to go through the parental attic and look through thousands of hours of tape and make a life project out of that. It's going to be unbelievable and it won't look anything like what we know.
**MH**: You think it's going to be unrecognizable?

**MC**: Is daily life recognizable as narrative? First of all there's an initial *découpage*. In the eighties, everyone had VCRs. In the next century, everyone will get cameras which will be the size of your hand with great resolution and digital sound. Maybe you'll have two or three, one in each hand with one on the top of your head looking backwards, who knows? The point is, there'll be this ongoing recording. Then twenty years later everyone will die. That's important. They'll die and somebody will see this material that they've never seen before. Cleaning up. Going through Dad's shirts. In some cases it'll be a lot of *Funniest Home Video* stuff. But sooner or later they'll come across a psychotic family, a family in disunity and disarray, a family that is the family of the future, a family that doesn't resemble the family as we know it ideologically. Some kid will get this stuff, and this won't be a kid plagued by the literary. It'll be a kid who lives in a different culture, a kid who is totally digital, and this kid will be someone who needs to make art, and this will be the material. What do you usually find in the history of sons and daughters going to the attic? Letters. What could be more literal than letters? But now it's going to be images and sounds, and this kid is going to make something out of all that. An unbelievable work of mourning, which is what all art is. The reason we do it — grief.

Because we're always mourning, we always want to make sure that we will be remembered. Making work helps because it remains — archival permanence and all that. It's a deeply unconscious part of it, individually and culturally. There's the knowledge we're going to die. There's also the threat of total annihilation which makes our culture different than any culture, ever. There may not be anybody left, and that's a new idea. We must be a culture that's radically grieving to want to set up the potential to completely annihilate ourselves so that there won't be anyone to mourn. That's the radical Other of civilization — nobody to mourn — inasmuch as civilization exists so that those who die will be mourned. That's why culture is organized. Every moment of culture is the setting in place of memorials and monuments. Certainly art is. When the threat of annihilation is posed precisely by technology, what better way to address an impossible future than with other instruments of high technology. It's unfortunate that the cinema is so geared to capital; is always making a gesture in the direction of capital. That's the problem. Why should makers live way below the poverty line all their lives? Maybe making work is

always a compromise between money and ambitions. I don't do anything at all. It may be the highest mode of non-compromise. Silence.

**MH**: Gregory Markopolous and Robert Beavers used to pursue that end — deciding to screen their work just once a year on an island off the coast of Greece. Attendance by invitation only.

**MC**: If art could become more private... One of the present taboos has to do with the degree of intimacy in work. It's usually located in the sexual, but it can be located in other places. One's anger, for example. Or one's death. But to take sex as an example — nobody makes a film which simply records sex. Sure, you can send away for home porno tapes made by "amateurs," but it's not the same because these people are still performing sex rather than doing it.

**MH**: What's the difference?

**MC**: What they do is constrained by the presence of the camera. Because it's so unaccustomed, it's not usual. But what if that presence were not unaccustomed? What if over a long duration, that presence became ubiquitous and thus unobtrusive? Then what kind of decoupage have you got? What kind of fragments have you got to make something out of? Almost unbelievable ones. Couldn't you do something to achieve it now? Couldn't we construct a world that we could fragment and make a film out of, which would be that intimate? Couldn't I make a sex scene that was actually like sex, that would have the horror, the intimacy, the ecstasy, and the grief that real sex has? Instead of being a show, which is what all sex is in cinema — either an appeal to voyeurism, or ,a deconstruction of voyeurism. Neither of those has anything to do with actually doing sex. Watching sex is another activity as far as I'm concerned, and one of my most enjoyed ones. But it's different. It appeals to different parts of the libido, zones of gratification. I can imagine living without doing sex. I can't imagine living without watching it. That's aterrible thing to say. Only a white male could say that. But someone else might say that's expressly perverse; this guy must be Artaud-like or something. I don't know. Maybe one of the defenses of staying at home and refusing to go out is to keep the hope alive. You seem unhappy and I can understand why. But in a way your reporting isn't real for me, though I believe what you say because I'm in my house and keeping my hope alive — for myself, which, I admit, is not doing you or anyone else any good. But I haven't abandoned all hope. Sooner or later something will have to be done.

**MH**: My hope is waning.

**MC**: But you're in the arena.

**MH**: This is my exit from the arena, my parting wave. I thought this book would be a celebration of different people's attitudes, understandings, and achievements.

**MC**: Oh, it's by no means a celebration, unless you think a funeral is a celebration. You're performing an act of mourning.

**MH**: That's what it feels like because everyone says, this thing that you're after, it's not there anymore. It's finished. All we can do is talk about what it was.

**MC**: You're attempting to recover the remains as you depart, and then you're going to monumentalize these remains in some fashion which you hope will be a book. That's a reasonable and, I think, thoroughly typical endeavour. It's proper in every sense of the word. At the same time, I would say news of my death may be premature. It may turn out that what has occurred is that a kind of periodization has ended — a period of your development, for example. But something else may happen. Certainly I don't think there's any reason to be optimistic. But it's astonishing how things change. A stupid invention in someone's garage can completely change the way everybody thinks. And there are garages in which the lights are burning all night.

WRITINGS



MIKE CARTMELL